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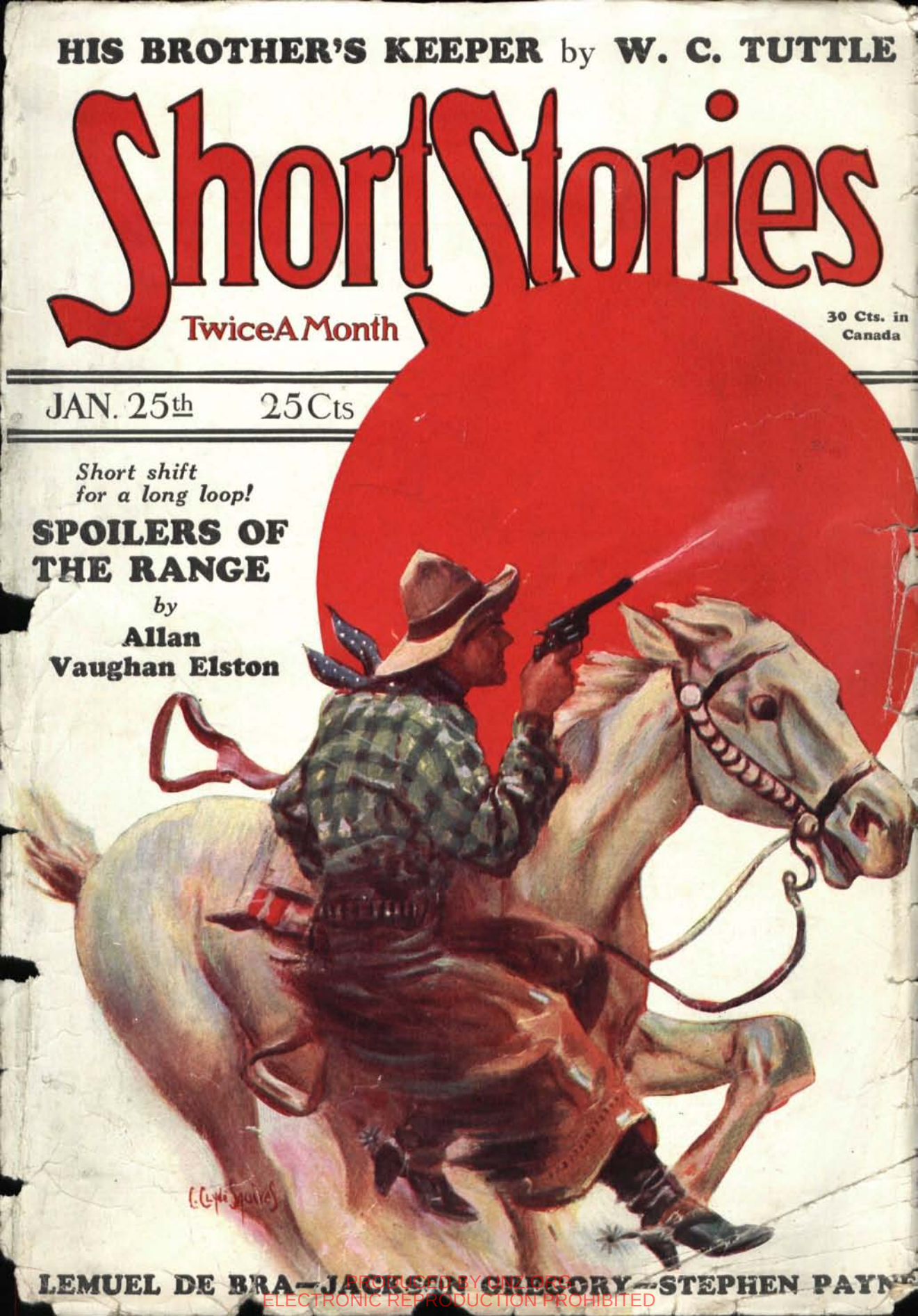
SPOILERS OF THE RANGE

by

Allan Vaughan Elston



LEMUEL DE BRA—JACKSON GREGORY—STEPHEN PAYNE

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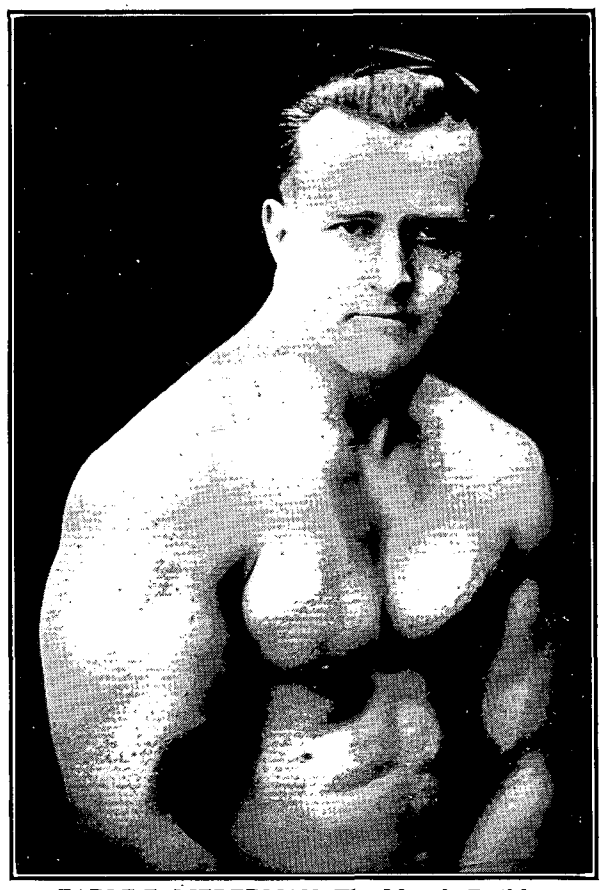
Kill This Man!

THERE'S a devil inside of you. He's trying to kill you. Look out for him! He tells you not to work so hard. What's the use? The boss only piles more work on you. He tells you not to bother with your body. If you're weak—you always will be weak. Exercise is just a lot of rot. Do you recognize him? Of course you do. He's in us all. He's a murderer of ambition. He's a liar and a fool. *Kill him!* If you don't, he will kill you.

Saved

Thank your lucky stars you have another man inside of you. He's the human dynamo. He fills you full of pep and ambition. He keeps you alive—on fire. He urges you on in your daily tasks. He makes you strive for bigger and better things to do. He makes you crave for life and strength. He teaches you that the weak fall by the wayside, but the strong succeed. He shows you that exercise builds live tissue—live tissue is muscle—muscle means strength—strength is power. Power brings success! That's what you want, and gosh darn your old hide! You're going to get it.



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Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

Which Man Will It Be?

It's up to you. Set your own future. You want to be the Human Dynamo? Fine! Well, let's get busy. That's where I come in. That's my job. Here's what I'll do for you: In just 30 days I'll increase your arm one full inch with real live, animated muscle. Yes, and I'll add two inches to your chest in the same time. Pretty good, eh? That's nothing. Now come the works. I'll build up your shoulders. I'll deepen your chest. I'll strengthen your whole body. I'll give you arms and legs like pillars. I'll literally pack muscle up your stomach and down your back. Meanwhile I'll work on those inner muscles surrounding your vital organs. You'll feel the thrill of life shooting up your old backbone and throughout your entire system. You'll feel so full of life you will shout to the world, "I'm a man and I can prove it!"

Sounds good, what? But listen! That isn't all. I'm not just promising these things. *I guarantee them!* It's a sure bet. Oh, boy! Let's ride.

Send for my new 64-page book "MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT" IT IS FREE

What do you think of that? I don't ask one cent. And it's the peppiest piece of reading you ever laid your eyes on. I swear you'll never blink an eyelash till you've turned the last cover. And there's 48 full-page photos of myself and some of my prize-winning pupils. This is the finest art gallery of strong men ever assembled. And every last one of them is shouting my praises. Look them over. If you don't get a kick out of this book, you had better roll over—you're dead. Come on, then. Take out the old pen or pencil and sign your name and address to the coupon. If you haven't a stamp, a postal will do. But snap into it. Do it *now*. To-morrow you may forget. Remember, it's something for nothing and no strings attached, no obligation. GRAB IT!

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The Next Issue February 10th

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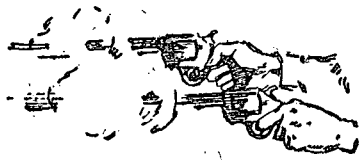

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Short Stories

Vol. CXXII, No. 2 — Whole No. 530

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR — D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

BULLDOG YOUR TROUBLES

"NEVER was no great hand at goin' out on the open range to look for trouble, nor for steppin' high, wide, and handsome in town where they's a lot o' gun slingers lookin' for notoriety by pickin' a scrap. Never trouble trouble until trouble troubles you, as the feller in the big minstrel show they had down to Rowlins last year sang. That's been my motto, too, an' I've lived to see a lot of fellers on the prod for trouble go to Boot Hill. Still an' all," continued Hank Hardrock as he built a cigarette and squatted on his boot heels, "that ain't to say there won't be plenty times in any hombre's life when he's got to meet trouble, an' meet it square. Well, mister, when that time comes, a feller ought to ride out of the chute a tootin' an' bulldog that trouble fair and square. He'd oughter wrastle it just like a buckaroo wrastles a spooky steer, and when he gets it down, if he's got to bite 'im lip to hold the critter, he'd better do it, and then hogtie the animule good and tight.

"You see out here we get some o' both kinds of men. The ones who go hunting trouble, bullyin' and generally makin' a nuisance of themselves—well, they usually eliminate themselves one way or t'other pretty soon. Then there's a few of the culls who run away from things. But they don't last long enough in this man's country fer to make it worth mentioning them. I guess it's no different out here than it is anywhere else, but I notice that if a feller gets so he lets his troubles chase *him* around the corral he might as well draw his time and pack his war bag. No, it's the feller, like I say, who don't hunt trouble, but who bulldogs it when it comes who lasts and becomes 'one of our leadin' citizens, and 'a pioneer of Mesa County' as the *Stockmen's Review* says."

THE EDITOR.

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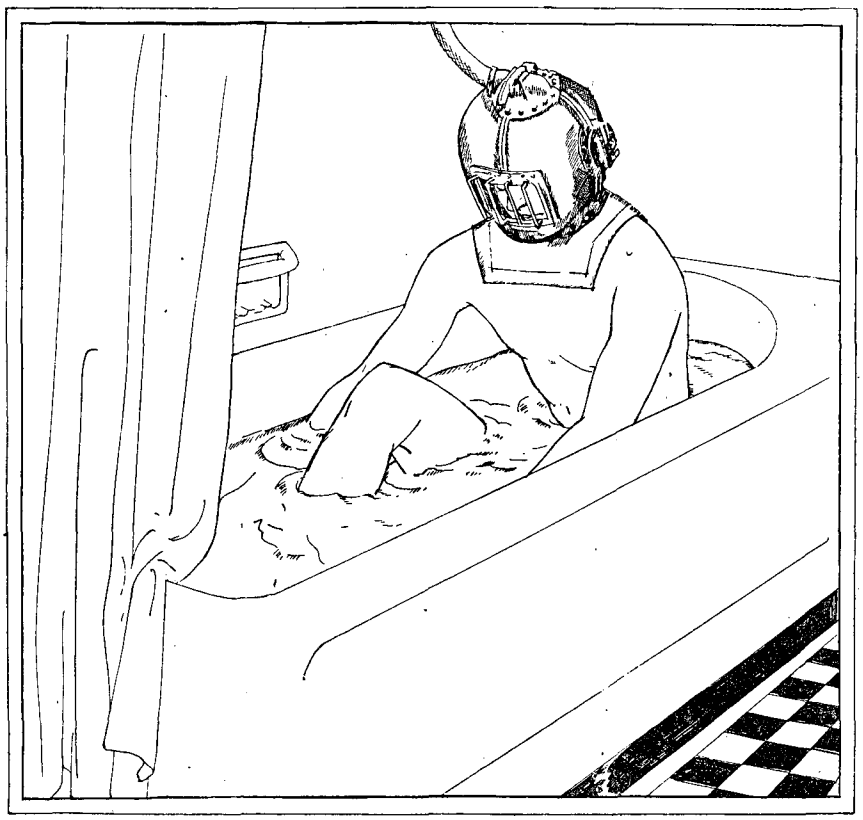

To daily divers

The desperate gentleman wearing the submarine millinery has climbed into his bath determined to go down among the molluscs and the octopi, if need be, on the trail of his cake of sinker soap.

If you have been compelled to plow along the tub-bottom in search of a cake of soap like that—

And if you do not own one of these fashionable deep-water derbies—

You can simplify, shorten and immeasurably improve the whole bathing operation by investing a carfare in a cake of Ivory.

Ivory *floats!*

Perhaps it has already occurred to you that the function of a soap in the bath is to get you clean—comfortably, luxuriously, quickly and triumphantly—and not to be the object of a feverish search every time it slips out of your hand. Well, then, you will welcome a floating cake of Ivory as a shipwrecked man welcomes the approach of a fifty-foot yacht with dinner on the table.

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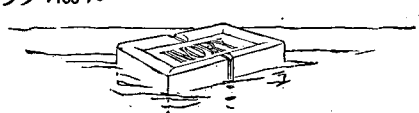

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When I first started making real important money I used to go down to the bank, draw out a roll—and just thumb it over in my office and grin! That's how good it felt to get success and big money, after years at a low-paid job.

Success and Big Money Were For Others, Not Me

Believe It or Not, That Was What I Thought of Myself—Just Twelve Short Months Ago

I'M TELLING YOU, just one year ago I'd never seen a hundred dollar bill in my life outside of a bank.

You'd think I'm kidding you if you saw the fine Radio business I own now. But it's gospel truth. Just twelve months ago I was only a poorly paid clerk, and I thought success had passed me by.

All my crowd in those days—the fellows I met in the pool-hall and at the bowling-alleys—said a fellow had to *have* money to make money. They claimed there was no chance for a fellow whose family didn't have money or some business to start him out in. And I'd decided they must be right.

I guess at that time I had just about given up hope. I thought there must be some kind of a mystery about making a lot of money. But I was due for a big awakening. Did I get it? Oh, boy! Read my story and judge for yourself.

IT ALL started one day last summer, when Helen, the girl I wanted to marry, was leaving for the seashore. Of course I went to the station to see her off.

As I stepped onto the station platform Bob Oakes and Wilmer Pratt had just rolled up in their cars. They climbed out with their arms full of bundles—books, expensive candy, flowers, all sorts of things. Well sir, I wished I could have swallowed in one gulp the little box of drugstore candy I had bought for Helen—it certainly looked pitiful beside all that stuff.

We three stood there talking to Helen until train time, while Helen's mother looked me up and down. Like any young girl's mother would, she had my financial standing already sized up within thirty-five cents. Cheap suit, cheap hat, she took it all in. And you could see on her face all the time what a lot of nerve she thought I had to give Bob and Wilmer a run for Helen.

Well, to make a long story short, Helen was nice, but her mother stood there looking scornful whenever she glanced my way, and she hardly spoke to me at all. I felt about as welcome as the measles, and as uncomfortable as the itch. I began to wish that I and my cheap suit and cheap hat could sink through the floor, but I stayed there and stuck it out.

WHEN Helen's train finally left, I slunk home, ashamed and humiliated. I went upstairs to my room and sat there with a lump in my throat, getting hotter and hotter and more ashamed of myself. Then I began to see red and redder.

Finally I jumped up and banged the table. "I'll show 'em," I growled through clenched teeth. "There *must* be some way for a man to make *real money!*" An idea suddenly flashed through my head.

Hastily I began thumbing the pages of a magazine on the table, searching for an advertisement that I'd seen many times, but passed up without thinking, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. With the advertisement was a coupon offering a big free book full of information. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome book, telling about opportunities in the Radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully and when I finished it I made my decision.

WHAT'S happened in the twelve months since that day, as I've already told you, seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months I've had a Radio business of my own! At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the outfit that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job, and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other line of Radio besides building my own retail business—such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book, I'd been wailing "I never had a chance!"

NOW I'm making real money, own a good car, stand high in my town, can borrow money at the bank any time I might want it. I'm getting some real *fun* and *enjoyment* out of life, not just *existing* from pay-day to pay-day.

And—just listen to this! Bob was in my place only the other day, and asked me for a job! Wilmer is still getting along pretty well on his father's money, but he'd trade places with me any day.

And Helen? Well—the honeymoon will be spent in Honolulu, starting two months from tomorrow!

HERE'S a real tip. Think it over—are you satisfied? Are you making enough money, at work that you like?

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Take another tip—No matter what your plans are, no matter how much or how little you know about Radio—clip the coupon below and look their free book over. The information it will give you is worth a few minutes of anybody's time. You will place yourself under no obligation—the book is free, and is gladly sent to anyone who wants to know about Radio. Just address: J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 1-A, Washington, D. C.

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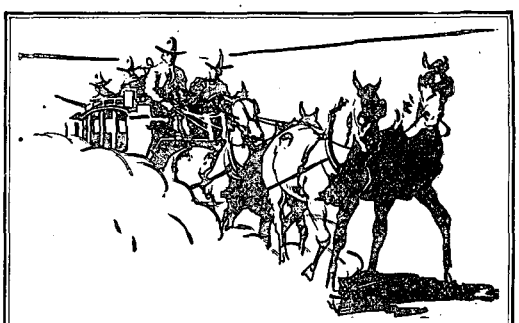

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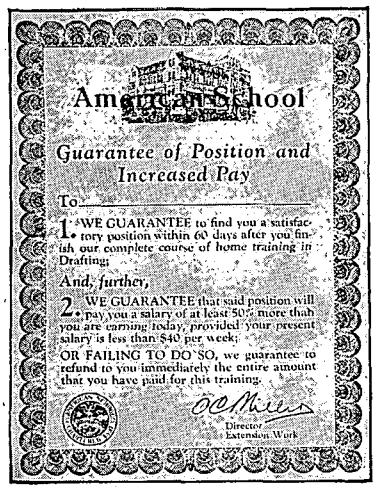
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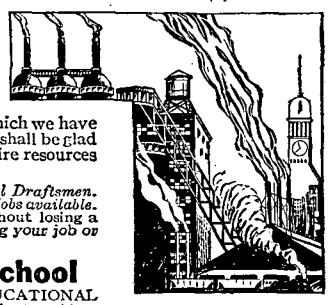

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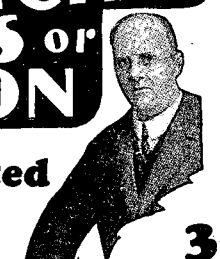

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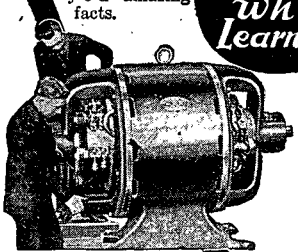

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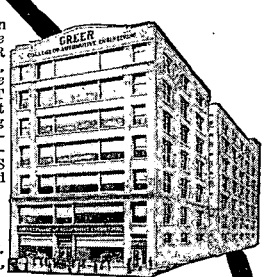

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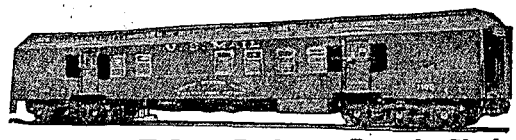

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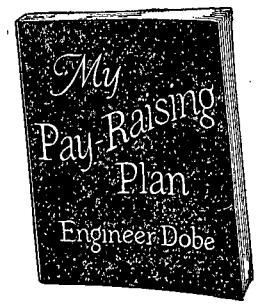

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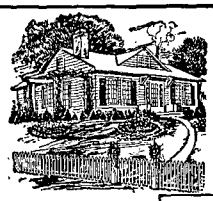
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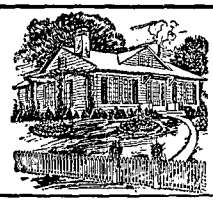
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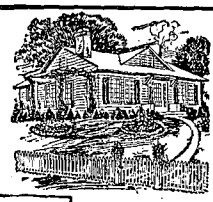
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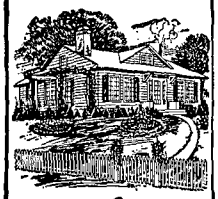
REWARD

Find the "One" House That Is Different From the Others—It's FREE

There are 14 six-room houses pictured here. To be sure they all look alike, but examine them closely. Thirteen of them are exactly alike, but one, and only one, is different. It isn't as easy as it looks. See if you can find the different one. It is going to be given away ABSOLUTELY FREE.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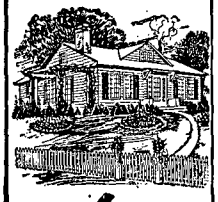
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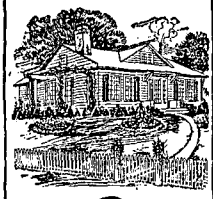
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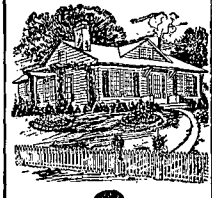
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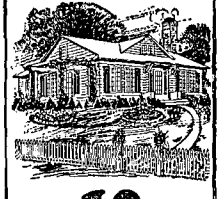
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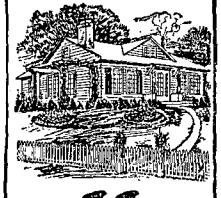
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These Clues Will Help You At first glance all the pictures look alike, but on closer examination you will see that one, and only one, differs in some way from all the others. The difference may be in the fence, steps or even shutters. If you can find the one house that is different from all the others write me TODAY QUICK. You may become the owner of this house without one cent of cost to you.

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You Cannot Lose Positively every one taking advantage of this opportunity is rewarded. Find the one house that is different from all the others and rush your name and address to me TODAY. A postal card will do, just say, "House No. — is different from all the others. Without any obligation please tell me how I can get this fine six-room house without one cent of cost to me."

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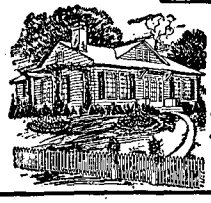
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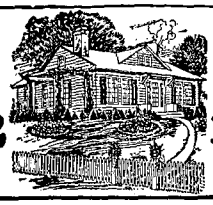
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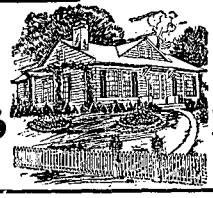
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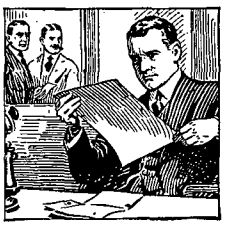
"He's the first man I think of whenever there's a position open. And he always made good because he prepared himself for the job ahead. We pay him $100 a week now and he will be earning even more some day. I wish we had more men like him."



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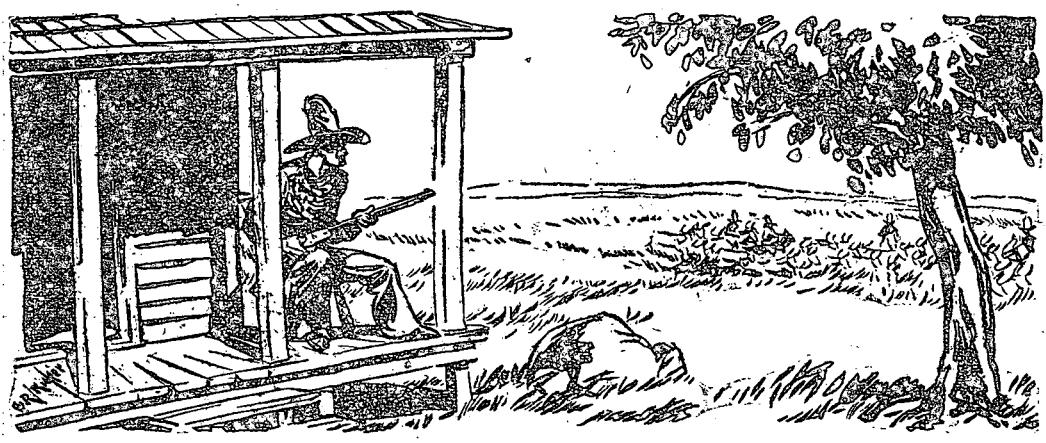
TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

JANUARY 25th 1928



SPOILERS OF THE RANGE

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

WHEN LEE MCAFEE CAME ON A VISIT TO HIS UNCLE'S RANCH UP THE CIMARRON, IT WAS A STRANGE WELCOME HE RECEIVED—HIS UNCLE HANGED AS A RUSTLER AND A SINISTER SHADOW OVER THE RANCH THAT WAS NOW HIS. FROM THEN ON TILL THE LAST FLASH FOR FLASH WHEN HE SHOT IT OUT WITH THE EVIL INFLUENCES OVER THAT PART OF THE COW COUNTRY, THIS IS A STORY OF DARING, CONFLICT AND BITTER RANCHING FEUDS

CHAPTER I

UP THE CIMARRON

LEE McAFEE, enroute for the Judson McAfee ranch on the upper Cimarron, traveled as far as Kenton by stage. Beyond Kenton the stage did not run. Why it had run even that far young McAfee could not understand; the straggling little village on the western tip of the Oklahoma panhandle impressed him as but a sorry monument to the great frontiersman for whom it was named. However, it boasted a well equipped livery stable and there Lee, recalling instructions from his Uncle Jud, sought to buy a trail outfit for the continuance of his journey.

While he was dickering for the two animals, one for saddle and one for pack, he became mildly interested in the diversions of a group of cowboys and stable loafers. A dozen of these were lounging in front of the barn, whiling away the afternoon in what seemed to McAfee a senseless and cruel sport. They were poisoning birds. From the roof of the livery to that of a blacksmith shop across the street they had strung a wire, and from this wire had suspended, at intervals, hunks of beef liver. The meat had been thoroughly salted with crystals of strychnine. To this bait fluttered birds, comely, long-tailed and graceful birds—birds such as Lee had never seen back on his father's Creek Nation farm. Half their feathers were a brilliant steel blue-black, while the other half were snowy white. They were being slaughtered now by the dozen. One by one they fluttered awing against the suspended meat, pecked at it, darted straight up and high into the air at the first shock of the stimulant, then dropped like lead to the dust. The street was black and white with

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the ruffled, feathered lumps; and every time a new one fell the idling cowboys cheered.

Once his horses were selected and the liveryman had promised to have them ready for the trail next morning, young McAfee took occasion to inquire into the bird massacre.

"You fellows don't cotton to them white-tailed jays much, do you?" he asked a jovial-mouthed, curly-haired cowboy who was seated on a feed box.

"Jays?" ejaculated the cowboy, looking closely to see whether the other was a tenderfoot. But on this point he could not be sure. Lee, having lived on the McAfee farm in eastern Indian Territory since the opening of that country to settlers four years ago, was as sunburned as the cowboy and as rawboned. He was dressed much as the latter would have dressed had he been traveling through the country by stage.

"Oh, you mean them magpies," grinned Curly-hair, assuming after a brief scrutiny that Lee was wise and had merely been making fun talk. "No, we don't cotton much to them thievin' scavengers. They've got so bad up and down this Cimarron Valley lately they don't give the stock a chance to sleep; and it seems lak a brand never will heal with them apeckin' and apeckin' allatime. Thanks, stranger; don't care if I do."

LEE had noticed the cowboy fumbling through his vest for the makings, and finding none. So the Easterner had passed over his own bag, which, by the label on it, the cowboy thought contained the familiar Duke's Mixture until he had rolled and tasted his cigarette.

"Gee! This here's got a kick in it, ain't it?" he commented, as he blew out a mouthful of smoke.

"Yes; that's natural leaf, raised on my dad's farm back in the Creek Nation. McAfee's my name; Lee McAfee."

Friendship was soon established and Lee learned that the cowboy's name was Curly Smith. Smith said that he had never worked any further up the valley than the Andy Summers place, which was halfway between Kenton and Folsom, New Mexico. Therefore the cowboy did not know Lee's Uncle Jud, the Judson McAfee place being only a little below Folsom. However it was Curly's idea that Lee could make the ride in one day, nooning at the Summers ranch.

"Got any more of that bird seed, Curly?" The interruption came from a stable hand who wished to poison another chunk of liver. Smith tossed the man a two ounce bottle which was half full of white crystals.

Lee McAfee, frankly admitting his ignorance about the fauna of the West, asked a few more leading questions about magpies. He learned that the birds were carnivorous, with the habit of alighting on the backs of cattle and stabbing at brand scabs, ulcerating them, at times actually eating helpless and crippled stock alive, pecking at the eyes of new born calves—all in all a major menace of the range.

Lee was thinking of this the next morning as, driving his pack mare, he rode up the Cimarron Valley on the last lap of his journey to his uncle's ranch. What a difference it made if one knew facts! Knowing them, it seemed just as reasonable to poison those birds as to bait a mouse trap in a pantry.

Two or three miles out of Kenton he crossed into the Territory of New Mexico. He continued on up the Cimarron, between bluffs which soon became hills, between hills which, as the day advanced, became the façades of lofty mesas. He knew that Jud McAfee's ranch, the U Bar, was some sixty miles above Kenton and seven miles below Folsom. Lee planned to push along and make the U Bar that day. He was eager to get to the ranch, which some day would be his own.

For his father's brother, Judson, was childless, and when on a visit last year back to the Creek Nation farm had taken a considerable fancy to young Lee. Lacking any other heir, he had avowed his intention of willing the New Mexico ranch to Lee.

Peter McAfee, Lee's father, had not thought much of the scheme. Jud had always been somewhat of a black sheep in the family, a wandering prodigal, who in fact until last year's visit had not been

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heard of at all for more than ten years. Peter had thought him in California when he had turned up suddenly claiming to have a well-stocked cattle ranch in the Cimarron Valley of New Mexico.

SOME day, Jud had promised, he would will the place to young Lee. He would send word for Lee to come at the proper time. And ten months after Jud's departure such word had come.

Naturally the young man had jumped at the chance.

"Not that I expect to kick off very soon," Jud's letter had explained, *"but a man never can tell what's going to happen in this country, so you might as well come out and be getting acquainted with the layout."*

There was wisdom in that; even old Peter McAfee himself had admitted it. Lee had two older brothers who could remain behind and help farm the Creek Na-

tion place. So off had gone Lee toward a mysterious inheritance in the West, and was now on the last leg of his journey.

Lee was a quick-witted, wide-awake youth. He was seeing sights which he had never seen before, but it did not take him long to learn all about them. Every bend in the valley added to his schooling of the West.

Along toward noon he could see ahead of him a ranch headquarters, a neat house and barn layout fronting on a square of irrigated alfalfa. This latter field was bordered by a ditch, under which a smallish, hip-booted man wielding a hoe was engaged, seemingly, in the business of irrigation. Recalling that Curly Smith had mentioned a certain Andy Summers as being located about halfway up the valley, Lee had guessed that this irrigated layout would be the Summers place.

But when Lee rode into the field to inquire if by chance he might get dinner at the ranch, he saw that the man was not irrigating at all. True, he was guiding water around here and there, in rivulets, but his only purpose in so doing proved to be to flood the craters of certain unsightly, miniature volcano-shaped cones of adobe which were spotted about the meadow. Lee watched the ranchman bash away a side from one of these craters with his hoe, then guide a smart stream of water into the hole. At last the hole filled to overflowing. Crawling forlornly forth then came a half drowned prairie dog, whose back the ranchman immediately broke with a lusty blow of his hoe. Another prairie dog came forth, and another. Seven dogs in all came from that one hole. They might as well have stayed home and drowned because the ranchman massacred them, one by one, on sight. Then he looked up and saw McAfee.

"HOWDY do, stranger?" he greeted cordially as, resting a moment from his exertions, he took out an old pipe and prepared to stoke it. Lee liked his face, which was smooth shaven and well featured; he appeared to be past middle age and a ranchman of above average substance. Just now Lee saw a chance to win his friendship in the same manner employed yesterday with Curly Smith, back at Kenton. The stockman's tobacco tin seemed to be empty.

"Here, try this," suggested McAfee, offering the sack of Creek Nation natural leaf, in which there were only about three smokes left.

"Thanks," returned the older man. After filling his pipe he offered to return the bag.

"Keep it," said Lee McAfee. "It's about empty and I got plenty more. Looks like you been makin' war on the gophers, huh?"

"Yep," answered the ranchman, whom Lee later learned to be Curly Smith's old employer, Andy Summers. "Yep; a feller's shore got to etarnally fight 'em, dad blast their ornery skins. Can't winter no cyows onless yuh raise feed; can't raise no feed onless yuh swat the sod-dogs."

Lee could see the bare islands around each dog hole. The meadow, otherwise just turning green now in the early spring, was well spotted with these brown, cone-

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centered circles. A relation between this dog-drowning chore and the bird poisoning spree of the Kenton cowboys registered in McAfee's mind. Both were routine steps of an organized human industry, the transformation of grass into beef. Obviously there was more to this stock business than the mere turning of cows loose to roam and raise calves. McAfee had heard considerable about such range marauders as bears, wolves and panthers, but he had never realized that small birds and rodents might be a serious menace to stock.

A half hour later, as he was seated at the Summers dinner table, young McAfee asked leading questions on the subject, as he had done with the Kenton cowboy; he was overlooking no opportunity to get a quick, practical range education.

"No," answered Summers, as he accepted a two-inch biscuit from the quiet, prematurely gray woman who was his wife, "b'ars and wolves and painters don't bother us much down here. Up north in the high timber they're bad, I understand, but down here in the Territory what stock they get yuh could stick in my eye. Sod-dogs is wuss. They eat the hay as fast as it grows onless you're at 'em all the time. And above the ditches, where yuh can't reach 'em with water, they multiply fast. Each thirty dogs eat as much grass as one cyow—eat it or kill it. That is, each thirty dogs drive one cyow from the range. Magpies is ornery, too. They worry cattle, an' keep 'em thin. But there's one other thing we got down here in this country that's wuss than either sod-dogs or magbirds."

"What's that?" asked Lee with quick interest.

Chapter II

At the Pasture Bars

But just then there came a hail from out-of-doors. And Summers arose and excused himself. Lee remained seated at the table with the two Mexican hands and the thin, gray-haired Mrs. Summers. The latter went to the kitchen for more biscuits and Lee's eyes strayed through the front door, which Andy had left open, to a group of mounted men in the yard.

They were leaning over in their saddles, talking to Summers on some subject which was obviously of grave importance. Every face in the group was serious, and every eye was hard. Speech was in whispers. Lee saw that every man was either a stockman or a stock hand, and that all wore belts and guns.

In a few moments Andy Summers entered the house. Brusquely he excused himself to the guest, telling Lee to make himself at home but that he, Summers, was called away on important business. Then he went into the kitchen to say good-by to his wife. Lee heard him tell her, without further explanation, that he might not be home till late. When he emerged from the kitchen he had changed his irrigation boots to riding boots, was wearing a belt and heavy revolver besides carrying a repeating rifle under his arm.

"Keep that water turned into them dog holes," he instructed the two Mexicans, who grunted acquiescence and continued knifing their beans. Then Summers departed without another word, closing the door behind him. Soon Lee heard the entire party galloping away, west, up the Cimarron.

Mrs. Summers came in with a supply of warm biscuits. She was a taciturn ranchwoman, used to leaving table talk to men, and there was no conversation until Lee bolstered it with the question:

"Have you any children, Mrs. Summers?"

"Just one; a daughter," was the quiet answer.

"A daughter, eh?" Lee echoed, more to make talk than anything else. "Married and moved away, I suppose."

"No; my Betty is not married. She teaches at the Cat Canyon school house, thirty miles up the valley."

"Thirty miles up, did you say?" exclaimed McAfee. "That ought not be far from my uncle's ranch, where I'm going."

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"Are you a nephew to Sol Quiggs?" asked the ranchwoman.

"No; my uncle is Judson McAfee."

LEE noticed that the two Mexicans, who had hardly lifted their faces from their beans till now, looked up and at him sharply, then significantly at each other. One of the pair raised an eyebrow, the other shrugged a shoulder.

"Oh! Jud McAfee," Mrs. Summers went on. "His is the next vega above Quiggs. My girl Betty boards with the Quiggs, which is the closest ranch to the school. Now let me get you another cup of coffee, young man." Without waiting for an answer she took Lee's cup and withdrew with it to the kitchen.

Young McAfee fell to wondering why the Mexicans had displayed such immediate and vital interest at the mention of his uncle's name. Then he recalled that he had not mentioned it before, or his own. Andy Summers, who of habit never asked a guest for his pedigree, had not asked it, nor had Lee thought to offer it.

Mrs. Summers returned with the hot coffee, which Lee consumed. But his own mood having become pensive he made no effort to induce further conversation. When he arose from the table he offered to pay for his dinner, but was refused.

The Mexican hands sidled out to the shade of a box alder. As Lee passed down to the barn to get his horses, he saw these fellows eyeing him through puffy, brown slits, whispering to each other as they licked the laps of cigarettes. Beyond being absently conscious of their impudent staring Lee paid them no attention. He went on to the barn, mechanically feeling in his vest for the makings of his own after dinner smoke. Then he recalled that he had given his tobacco sack to Summers, out there in the hay field.

Soon he was riding on up the Cimarron, driving his pack mare ahead. He made a fine figure as he rode along, for he was a handsome, well set-up youth, just short of his middle twenties. He was farm bred and saddle wise, needing only a few lessons in range lore to make him immediately a unit of this western country.

Indeed, in this day, many of the cattle workers of the plains were only a season or two removed from Eastern farms. And the Creek Nation farm of Peter McAfee was hardly of the East. Except that he wore no belt or six-gun, or carried a coil of rope over his saddle horn, Lee might easily have mingled with that group with whom Andy Summers had ridden away, without appearing conspicuous. As for chaparajos, he wore none; but neither had the half of that group of riders. Cattle along the Cimarron were still being fed in the vegas, and there was little riding at this season through brush under the rimrocks.

In no case would anyone have taken Lee for a tenderfoot, unless he gave himself away by some patently ignorant question. As he rode along now he thought of his last question to Summers, concerning the identity of that third range menace which was "wuss than sod-dogs or magbirds." The interrupting visitors had diverted Andy's attention, thus robbing Lee of an increment to his fast growing knowledge of the West.

AS HE jugged along, up the trail which paralleled the twisty, wild-cherry-lined bed of the Cimarron, his mind reverted to his uncle, Judson McAfee. U Bar; that was the brand of Judson's ranch, Lee recalled. That was all he knew about it. As for Judson himself, Lee had only seen him once, recalled him to be a smallish, hatchet-faced man, unlike the other McAfees, somewhat close-mouthed, merely having described the U Bar as "a right nice layout, with a good water right."

By now the mesas on either side of the valley had become real mountains. Scrub oak on the slopes were not yet budded, for the month was April, and in the crevices of the rimrocks above still clung the remains of the winter's snow. Beyond those rimrocks, so they had told Lee back at Kenton, were brown and almost waterless plateaus, which furnished summer range for the creek bottom ranches. There were few or no houses up there, he had learned. The scant population of the country lived in the Cimarron Valley, the bulge of each bend in the valley furnishing a site for a hay layout. Here the settlers lived, using

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the fertile valley bends as wintering grounds and for all-year headquarters, and as points of attack in the business of running cattle in summer on the high government land above the rimrocks.

Such a headquarters Lee passed at nearly every major bend of the creek. Sometimes the hay field was vega, sometimes alfalfa. Often he would see a Mexican hand cleaning last year's tumbleweeds from an irrigation ditch, for it was about time for the seasonal snow floods.

Late in the afternoon, McAfee saw a lone building by the trail ahead which he could tell was not a ranch-house. It was at the mouth of a dry side canyon, and from its shape and belled cupola he guessed it to be a school. More than likely it was the Cat Canyon school house, referred to by Mrs. Summers, of which her daughter, "Betty," was mistress.

Somewhere near, then, was the Sol Quiggs layout, and the next ranch above that would be Judson McAfee's. Just now Lee's attention was attracted by a comely young woman who was coming out of the school. He knew she must be the teacher, probably going home after a day's work. As she walked toward a pony at a hitch rack, on which was a side saddle, she held up, to keep from tripping herself, the skirt of a long, black riding habit with a quick movement of grace she leaped to the pony's saddle, turning the animal down a path leading to the main road.

LEE was now sure she was going home. On beyond the school about a mile distant, he could see a building group, centered in a vega, which was no doubt the ranch of Quiggs. It was there, he remembered, that the girl boarded.

With a healthy interest his eyes drifted toward her again, as she came down the school yard path to the main road. By chance McAfee himself arrived at the junction of trails just as she did. The girl, not having the slightest doubt but that Lee was one of the neighborhood riders, all of whom she had met at various school bees and frolics but whose names she was often at a loss to recall, gave the young man a smile of fresh and unembarrassed friendliness.

Lee smiled in return, removing his hat. The moment his hat came off, Betty Summers became doubtful as to whether she had ever met him, after all. She turned west up the main road, toward Quiggs, her horse coming almost abreast beside Lee's. McAfee was not driving the pack mare now, but leading it, due to the fact that the loose animal, after the long day's trek, had been tending to laze along.

No, thought Betty Summers, looking at the young man a second time, she had never seen him before. She liked his looks, and decided that she certainly would have remembered a young man with such clear brown eyes and with such a clean-cut profile.

"How do you do, Miss Summers?" greeted Lee, as he replaced his hat.

She looked at him again, quickly. He was smiling. Surely if she had seen that smile before she would have known it. Yet he called her name; therefore he could hardly be a stranger. After all, she decided, he must have been introduced to her at one of those cowboy-jammed dances which were such common affairs up and down the Cimarron.

He strengthened this conclusion a moment later, when he asked, "Are you going home to the Quiggs? If so, I'll ride that far with you if you don't mind."

"Yes indeed; and I'll be very glad to have you," she answered, smiling sweetly, but all the time raking her mind for the man's name, and trying to recall the instance of their former meeting.

"I took dinner at your house today," he went on. "Your mother and father are quite well. Mr. Summers rode up this way ahead of me. Did he come this far?"

More than ever now the girl was forced to concede that she must know the young man, who seemed to be on such intimate terms with her family. But where and when had she met him?

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"No," she replied. "Dad hardly ever comes up this far in the valley. If he had come by here this afternoon, he would have stopped to see me, I'm sure."

Lee, forced to ride a pace behind the girl on account of the drag of his lead rope, had a good chance to appraise her. He saw that she was slender, graceful, with sensitive but intelligent features. Her eyes were black, and long lashed. He saw a spot of pink in the cheek toward him which resembled the kernel of a rose.

Strangely, he was not at all conscious of the peculiar trend of the conversation. When, coming down the school yard path, she had smiled at him, he had not supposed it was because she was thinking she had met him before. He merely knew that it was the way of the West to greet strangers with a smile.

BETTY SUMMERS now made a cautious effort to identify him. "Let's see," she remarked carelessly, "you were at the Clegg's barn dance last month, weren't you?"

"No," replied Lee, his mind not particularly fixed upon his speech but on an extremely fascinating curl which was peeping out from under the girl's hat. "No, last month I was down on the lower Cimarron."

He meant that he had been away down where the Cimarron joins the Arkansas, at the north edge of the Creek Nation and some six hundred miles from his present position. But to Betty, "lower Cimarron" meant relatively lower on it, probably down around Kenton. She knew quite a few Kenton boys; one of them had worked for her father for two years.

"Do you know Curly Smith, at Kenton?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," answered Lee. "Shared a room with him last night at the Kenton hotel."

They rode along for a space in silence. Silence builds the quickest, smoothest friendship; their own grew healthily.

"Speaking of dances," remarked McAfee, "do they have many of 'em up here?"

"Oh, yes," answered the girl brightly. "We're having one at my school Friday week. It's the night of the last day of school. I suppose you'll be there."

"At your school, did you say?" Lee asked. "Why, yes, of course, I'll be there."

Lee rode along for perhaps a hundred yards in preoccupied silence. He did not hear her remark that the Quiggs meadow, which they were now flanking, was pretty well choked out with cola de raton. Therefore his next words came with all-timed irrelevancy when he said suddenly, "That is, ma'am, if you'll dance with me."

BETTY looked his way suspiciously, then laughed merrily.

"Oh, you mean about next Friday week! Of course I'll dance with you, if you come."

They continued along, now at a walk. The tired pack mare was dragging at the lead rope, which fixed the pace of the party.

Conversation skipped from dances to foxtail in alfalfa, then to the head of snow water running in the Cimarron. All the while, Betty Summers, though wondering why she could not place the extremely good looking young man in her memory, had not the slightest doubt but that he belonged to the country. As for Lee himself, he was so immensely interested in the girl that he forgot all about explaining that he was merely a stranger who had just happened to take dinner that day at her father's ranch.

Soon, much too soon for McAfee, they came to the Quiggs gate.

Lee dismounted and removed the bars, for it was that kind of a gate. He stood aside as she rode in, then replaced the barrier.

As he remounted he was conscious of a considerable reluctance to leave her. He called across the bars, "You said Friday week, didn't you?"

She had turned herself. Her horse faced his across the gate as she answered, "Yes, next Friday week."

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The sun was down, and the frosty coolness of an early spring twilight had settled over the valley. There was a vigorous freshness in the atmosphere which, together with the charm of the young woman across the bars, made Lee McAfee bold.

Before he knew it he was asking, "And who is going to take you to this dance, next Friday week?"

Betty Summers blushed as she looked away from him and up the valley road. She knew what was coming, and was not ill pleased. Just then she saw a horseman riding down the trail from the west.

"I don't know yet," she answered Lee, in a low, melodious voice; "maybe with Mrs. Quiggs; maybe with Bill Ballard, the Quiggs' foreman. Bill generally asks me."

There was a pause, after which she added, "but he hasn't yet." There was the hint of a guileful dare in her last words. She was still looking at the oncoming horseman from the west.

"Why, there comes Bill now."

Lee looked up the trail and saw a cowboy riding toward them, down-valley. Instantly Lee recognized the man, both by horse and face. He was a swarthy-featured fellow, affecting small black mustaches and with insolent eyes. He had been one of the crowd who had called on Andy Summers at noontime. Lee reflected that he must have covered considerable ground since then, to be coming now from the west, the Summers' place being thirty miles east. Lather on Ballard's horse also attested to this fact.

But the point that interested Lee McAfee was that this fellow was the Quiggs foreman who "usually" asked Betty Summers to go to dances, but who had not yet asked her for the one next Friday week.

The thought came to McAfee, whether or not the intonation of the girl's speech had induced it, that here now was a certain precious opportunity knocking at his door. Real opportunities came but once, he understood, and if not grasped, were lost forever.

Only a few seconds more would he be alone with Betty Summers at these twilit pasture bars. Here came Bill Ballard a-gallop. And Bill usually—yes—he usually asked her. But he hadn't yet!

CHAPTER III

THE HERITAGE OF SHAME

"WILL you let *me* take you next Friday week, Miss Summers?" Lee asked.

Then, for the first time and too late, the fact struck him like a whip that she did not even know his name. Hardly were the words out of his mouth than he remembered this, and immediately felt like the cheapest kind of an impostor.

Yes, it had been a blunderingly impertinent request. His face became as red as fire; all he could do was to add lamely, "I'm Lee McAfee, nephew to Judson McAfee, little ways up-valley."

At his identification the girl blushed a deeper red than Lee. Lee McAfee? She knew no Lee McAfee; she had encouraged a perfect stranger. Jud McAfee had four cowboys on his pay, none of them his nephews, and all, of whom she knew slightly, although they seldom mixed socially with the Quiggs or Summers outfit. Certain it was that this brown-eyed stranger, if he belonged to the McAfee ranch, must have newly come to the country.

"Howdy, Betty; howdy, stranger!" It was Bill Ballard who spoke, as he drew his horse to a standstill at the gate. Lee did not know whether to be glad or sorry for the interruption. It gave the girl no time to answer his question, an answer he could predict without hearing—for what else could she do but turn him down?

"Hello, Bill," answered Betty Summers. "Mr. Ballard, meet Mr. McAfee."

Ballard whirled sharply, looking insolently at Lee. He twisted the two ends of his small mustaches as he echoed:

"McAfee! McAfee, eh? What McAfee?"

"I'm Judson McAfee's nephew," answered Lee, somehow conscious of an intended offense in the man's tone. "I'm on my way to take a job on his ranch," he added.

HE COULD see that Ballard was taking more than an ordinary interest in him. Something about his meaning gaze made Lee think of those two Mexicans at dinner time.

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"So you're a McAfee, eh?" was Ballard's comment, as he sat there still twisting his mustaches. "And you're on your way to take a job on Jud's ranch, huh? Well, you——" But here Ballard chopped his speech short, as though afraid he might say too much. Brusquely he turned from Lee, dismounted, removed the bars and led his horse through.

Inside the pasture he remounted and said to the girl, "Betty, I'll race you to the house. What say?"

He was completely ignoring Lee now. But not so, Betty Summers. She rode as close to the bars as she could and extended her hand across it.

"Good-by, Mr. McAfee," she said, displaying dimples of exceeding charm. "And don't forget. It's Friday week, remember. And thank you so much for asking me. I'm usually ready by eight o'clock. Can you come by that early?"

Again Lee grew as red as a beet. He gulped, tried to swallow his tongue, finally managing to reply, "Why, yes, thankee; I'll call for you at eight, Miss Summers."

Bill Ballard, who had heard this dialogue in dour amazement, now, at last catching the significance of it, blurted, "What's this? What do you mean—you generally——"

Ignoring him, Betty spoke directly across the bars again. "That will be just fine, Mr. McAfee. Good-by." Then she turned her horse from the gate.

"Why, Betty," exclaimed Ballard. "I thought we—I thought you—why can't you let me take you to that dance?"

"Oh, did you want to take me, Bill?" asked the girl. "Why didn't you ask me sooner? I have an engagement with Mr. McAfee now. What did you say about beating me to the house? All right; come on." She spurred her pony and was off across the meadow at a run.

But Ballard did not follow her immediately. Seemingly he forgot his challenge for a race, and another challenge flashed from his deepset black eyes, a challenge directed at Lee McAfee. He sat there nervously pulling his mustaches, glaring at the man in the road.

"Fellow," he said at last, when Betty Summers was far out of hearing, "I just passed your Uncle Jud up the road a piece. Him and four of his punchers is waitin' fer you at the creek ford, just inside his east line."

"Waiting for me?" echoed Lee. "He didn't know I was coming."

"There was a whole lot of other things he didn't know was comin', either," answered Ballard. "All the same he was waitin' fer 'em; and you'll find him waitin' fer you, too, at his east ford."

Whereupon Bill Ballard turned and spurred his horse away at a lope, following Miss Summers toward the Quiggs house.

MORE than puzzled, Lee rode west along the main road. So Jud's east line was where the trail crossed the creek, and only "up the road a piece!" And Jud, with his four helpers, was there waiting for him!

Finally his mind discarded the mystery and centered on more pleasant subjects. Betty Summers was going to the dance with him. Had deliberately picked him, Lee McAfee, in the very face of her usual escort!

With his thoughts switching back and forth from the dour predictions of Ballard to the sweet friendship of Miss Summers, Lee McAfee traveled the last few miles of his long journey. While it was still light enough to see he came to a place where the trail shifted from the south to the north side of the valley, crossing the Cimarron River at a shallow ford.

Lee rode into the ford, which was only about ten yards in width. Then, on the north bank ahead and above him, he saw a sight which nearly congealed his blood. There was a tall, yellow and barkless sycamore there on that bank. Some flash of fire from the sky had despoiled it of life, and its branches were gaunt and twigless. Dead also were the five men who hung by their necks from the lowermost of those

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gaunt limbs. The smallest of these dangling corpses had the face of a man Lee McAfee had seen before, though but once. It was his Uncle Jud. Before him now in the gloom, he saw Jud McAfee, swung like a thief.

But was he a thief?

In spite of the hopeless, helpless horror which gripped him, and the nausea which stifled him like the fumes of a poison gas, Lee rode his horse on across the ford and up the bank. What was that tied around Jud's neck?

He saw now that it was a pasteboard placard; on it was writing inscribed with bold, black characters. The text ran

"These rustlers were caught once, and warned; They were caught twice, and warned; Today was the third time; now let them WARN OTHERS."

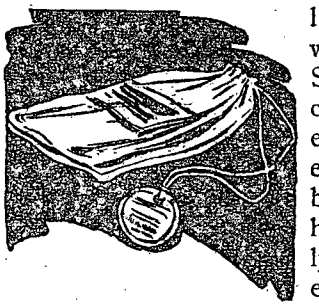
That was all.

For a long time Lee sat his saddle, with bowed head. A thousand dumb conjectures raced through his brain, each one plumbing deeper the depth of his despondency, crushing him, shaming him, each stabbing like as many hot needles through the very wall of his heart. His uncle hanged for a rustler!

AS TO who had performed the executions he had no doubt at all. Obviously the party must have been large, to have handled five men. Without a question it had been the work of the raiding party which Lee had seen in the process of being recruited at noon, claiming Andy Summers for a member.

Then, on the ground near by, he saw proof of this. His downcast eyes picked up a small object which, even in the deepening gloom, was at once familiar. Dismounting, he retrieved the thing. Examining it more closely, smelling it, he identified it beyond doubt. It was an empty Duke's Mixture sack which, by the peculiar pungent smell and by a few greenish crumbs clinging to it yet, he knew to be the one he had given Andy Summers at noon. Andy had been here. On one man at least Lee McAfee could pin the guilt of this crime. And with a choking sob he swore that he would do it.

If it were his last act and if it took a lifetime he would convict Summers of this crime. With the evidence of this empty tobacco bag he would hang, righteously, an unrighteous hangman.



Then, remounting his horse, Lee stood in his stirrups and cut the dead men down.

One by one they struck the ground, these dead, buckling grotesquely, ghastly, inanimate contortionists there on the gloom-bound bank of the Cimarron. Sharply they brought back to Lee McAfee certain clusters of dead magpies on the streets of Kenton, Oklahoma. And again he had a vision of half-drowned rodents crawling from their holes to have their backs broken with the blade of a hoe. Dumb things—those beasts and birds! Doomed for being thieves, parasites, despoilers of the range.

HERE now were five humans, treated with like vengeance. Was there no sanctity for the mortal soul, thought Lee. Did the range have but one law, and one penalty, for thieves—whether they walked the earth, or flew above it or burrowed in its dust?

The silent dead, sprawling there on the river bank, seemed answer enough to Lee McAfee. There they lay, despoilers, to be despoiled themselves, carrion by night for beasts and by day for birds. But no, that could never be, thought Lee. Here under this very tree he must bury them himself.

He felt that he could not take a full deep breath till they were covered, till their shame was hidden from the world. He had a short-handled camp spade in his packs, and with this he worked the long night through. By morning the ground was cleared, except for five brown humps. Hollow-eyed and listless Lee leaned against the old dead sycamore, and his own skin seemed to have become, overnight, as yellow as the tree's tough, barkless bole.

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As well as being infinitely dispirited, he was faint and hungry, for he had not eaten since noon of the day before.

When the sun was fully up he went on to the McAfee ranch house, which he found deserted. Around its door a flock of chickens were impatiently mustered for breakfast, while from the barn came moo-ings of distressed stock.

Lee was farm bred; mechanically he went about, within the next hour or so, the certain obviously necessary chores of the place. When they were done he fed himself, from scraps he found about the kitchen. Then—for this day was as dark to him as any night—he went to bed.

Even his dreams denied him respite, for they were as ugly as life itself. Their plot concerned the hanging of Andy Summers for the murder of Jud McAfee. Just before they sprung the trap Summers' daughter came up and said she would break an engagement with Lee, for some affair Friday week, unless they cut Andy down. Should they cut Andy down? The dream wrestled heavily with this issue, unable, it seemed, to make a decision. At last young McAfee awoke, sore of body and sick of soul. When he went outside it was still light, but the whole world seemed harsh and hostile; the vegas of the U Bar, and those grazing specks of red, mocked him. He was master and man of this ranch, but the very sight of it sickened him. It was a heritage of shame.

Chapter IV

A Bar of Justice

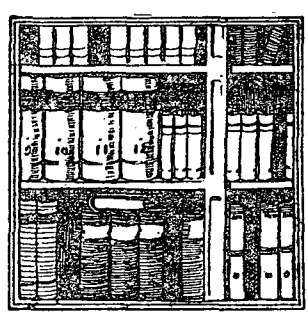
SEVEN miles above the U Bar lay the town of Folsom, which was in Lee McAfee's time, as it still is, the only settlement on the Cimarron for its entire hundred miles of length in New Mexico.

The chief distinction of Folsom was, and is, its position at the base of the most perfect mountain in the world, a perfection which has caused Congress to make the mountain a national monument. From Folsom's very backstreet the lofty Capulin ascends, beyond doubt the loveliest cone of evergreened cinders ever turned in Nature's lathe. Although the nearest great volcano to America's heart, few know of it. Only the wicked are like to achieve fame, and Capulin has not, within Folsom's memory, misbehaved. In fact it is clothed with cedar and spruce, as even at top and bottom as the hem and collar of a royal robe. And the very bowl of its crater is a bower of capulin, or wild cherries.

Across Folsom from this volcano, and rising to like height, is a chain of elongated mesas extending east and west along the Colorado-New Mexico line. From between Capulin and the mesas, and squarely through the town of Folsom, runs the Cimarron River, normally only a small creek this high on its watershed.

Everything in Folsom dates from one of two events, the coming of the C. & S. railroad or the great flood of the Cimarron which, twenty-one years later, destroyed half the town. Suffice it to say that Lee McAfee's first entry to the place—that day he rode in to start prosecution against his uncle's murderers—was between these two major historical events.

McAfee's objective was the saloon, and law office, of Adam Brisbane. The structure which housed both of these apparently mismated institutions was on the very bank of the creek, and was later carried away by the great flood. The reason why Lee directed his footsteps to it was that he had found evidence of a friendly association between his uncle and the saloonman-barrister, Brisbane. Certain old papers at the U Bar revealed the fact that once Judson had gone to court against a neighbor in a matter of water right; in this case he had successfully retained Brisbane as counsel.



Through a barroom which Brisbane operated, by the agency of a Mexican tender, and for the sole reason that his law practice alone did not afford him a living, back to a cubby-hole, once a poker room, where Brisbane practiced criminal law, went Lee McAfee. There he found the attorney in his usual

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stance, half cremated in tobacco smoke and buried in dusty books.

He was a homely man, cadaverous of jowl and bust, had been compared more than once with Lincoln in physique and profile, as well as in the sympathetic interest he usually took in the affairs of other men. When Lee first saw him he appeared to be working away as industriously as though he had been retained in a score of murder cases.

IT IS very likely that in the mirror of his own remarkable mind, he was. Adam Brisbane was active mentally. And he had a way of briefing, whether for practice or excitement, summaries of the day's famous cosmopolitan crimes. He was accustomed to imagine himself counsel for the underdogs of such cases, sometimes preparing, with an exacting conscience, long and ponderous essays of defense.

Truth was that he need not have gone so far to find clay for his art. Crimes aplenty were committed just beyond the partition in his own barroom. But such cases of court as might have come from these shootings Brisbane usually nipped in the bud, cheating himself of case and client. Nearly always it would happen that he was a friend of the killer, or deceased, or both; he had even been known to come out of his office and take a belated part in these shootings himself. In any case he was always too near to these affairs to get the proper legal perspective; he was more than likely to advise patching them up, or shooting them out, out of court, always willing to lend assistance in either case; after that he would return to his den and resume his lonely, smoke-fogged dream trials.

He was so engaged when Lee McAfee entered his den.

"Are you Mr. Brisbane?" asked Lee.

Mr. Brisbane came awake. Then, fanning the fog away for a better view of the client, if such the tall young man should prove to be, he answered, "That's my name, sir. Have a seat, and kindly overlook the disorder of my study." He then began scooping law books from a chair, and when it was clear McAfee sat down.

"Have a cigar," invited Brisbane, offering a stogie.

Lee shook his head and began rolling his own natural leaf cigarette.

"What may I do for you?" asked Brisbane.

Lee's eyes hardened. "You can assist me," he answered in a low, tight voice; "convict Andrew Summers and others of the murder of my uncle, Judson McAfee."

"Ah, your uncle!" remarked the lawyer. "Then you are Jud's nephew Lee, from the Indian Territory."

"How did you know he had such a relative?" asked Lee.

"I was Jud's lawyer," returned Brisbane. "Sometime ago he drew a will in a nephew's favor. The instrument is now in my safe."

"I am that nephew," admitted Lee. "But the inheritance does not interest me. What does concern me is that my uncle was murdered and I can prove the identity of at least one of his assailants." Here Lee produced an empty tobacco sack, placing it upon Brisbane's table. Then he proceeded to relate the events of his ride from Kenton, his stop at the Summers place, Summers' sudden departure with an armed mob, his later meeting with Bill Ballard, and his final findings at the ford.

AS USUAL in local affairs, Brisbane essayed to cheat himself of client and case, on account of personal prejudice. When Lee's story was finished the lawyer answered decisively, "I advise you to drop the case. Your uncle—I regret to say it, for he was at one time my friend and client—was just what the placard accused him of being, a rustler. He had been warned at least twice, to my knowledge; in fact, the last time he was in this office I warned him myself. 'Look here, Jud,' I said, 'I've heard a lot of rope talk drifting through the partition from the barroom. Better coil up your night loop, Jud, and give it a rest.' 'Whatcha mean?' asked Jud, swelling up. 'Keep your shirt on,' says I; 'I mean just this. The Cimarron stockmen are getting suspicious. Two of them are willing to swear in court as having eyewitnessed you in the act of branding stock not your own. A third has still better proof, an actual photograph of you, redhanded in the act. Take a look at it, Jud.'

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"With that," went on Brisbane, "I showed him this snapshot. Duke Ballard—he's this Bill Ballard you were talking about, McAfee, only most of the boys call him Duke, on account of those trick mustaches—Duke Ballard was showing this off on my bar not long ago. I managed to palm it, slipping it up my sleeve, and Ballard was still looking for it the last time I saw him."

The lawyer had drawn from his pocket, and now displayed to Lee McAfee, a small snapshot showing a man in the act of branding a calf on the open range. The picture was not clear, or in any way a good one. In fact the time was only a few years after the first pocket camera had been placed on the market. This print was circular, and about two and one-half inches in diameter.

In it, the brander's back had been toward the camera, but there was plenty of evidence as to the identity of Judson McAfee. In the foreground was Judson's saddled horse, with the U Bar showing in the picture. The calf's mother was also seen standing by, bawling in distress.

"Any man in the valley could identify that horse as Judson's," explained Brisbane. "Also you'll notice that the cow is muley. There is only one outfit in the valley runs muley stuff, and that's Sol Quiggs' SQ. When I showed the picture to Judson he just got red and nervous, and walked out. Then what do you reckon he did? The next day he and his four men rounded up every U Bar cow and dehorned them all. Thus neutralizing the evidencing of the picture. Wouldn't you call that an admission of guilt, young man?"

"Does that sum up the evidence for which they murdered him?" demanded Lee.

BRISBANE grimaced. "Don't use that term, please," he answered. "It does not fit the case at all. Your uncle was not murdered; he died a natural death. For being lynched is only a natural decease for a rustler. Sooner or later every wide-looper catches it, and it's fatal. And no, the photograph wasn't all they had on him. Three times he had been caught red-handed by reputable eye-witnesses. Discounting the Quiggs evidence as possibly incompetent on account of the fact Judson was a known enemy of his, that still leaves two, other ranchers who had never had any dispute with Jud at all. Also the U Bar calf herd—Jud only stole calves—was ludicrously flexible. One month he would have fifty, the next month two hundred, the next only fifty again. He could never explain how he got them or what became of them. Judson McAfee was guilty all right; you might as well drop the case."

"Well, admit that he was," answered Lee, sullenly. "Admit that he was. Nevertheless Andrew Summers and his mob were guilty of murder and I'm going to see at least one of them, Summers, convicted. I'll——"

"Hold on, lad," interposed Adam Brisbane, picking up the Duke's Mixture bag and frowning at it. "Let me see if I can't give you a new slant at this thing. Suppose you convict Summers. I don't believe you could, don't believe any jury in this county would convict a reputable stockman like Summers for stringing up a known rustler, but say you did. Summers would be all you'd get. There were at least twenty men with him, and every one of them was a harder nut than Summers. Every ranch on the upper Cimarron was probably represented at the hanging. No doubt some in that crowd were as ornery and crooked as your uncle Jud, although more discreet. Those are the ones you'd never get, young man. Others were upright, square-shooting stockmen, and the pick of these was Andy Summers. He'd be the goat; and he's got a right nice wife and daughter, who'd both suffer for——"

"That's his business," broke in Lee savagely. "He ought to have thought of that before he went romping off on that lynching bee. But I see I'm taking up your time, Mr. Brisbane. I came here to employ you as special prosecutor, but it looks like the other side has hired you first. Good day, sir."

Lee was as hot under the collar as he

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had ever been in his life as he turned away, taking a step toward the den door with the object of making an exit through the barroom.

"Hold on," cried Adam Brisbane, hot under the collar himself. Rising to his full, awkward height he followed Lee toward the door, where he caught the young man by the arm. "Hold on; you can't get away with talk like that in my office."

"Who's going to stop me?" retorted Lee, whirling around and jerking his arm free. "Not you, you shyster. It's plain you were there yourself—under that sycamore. Your own skinny hands helped pull the ropes."

"You're a liar," answered Brisbane, his voice suddenly cold and calm. Reaching around under the tail of his long black coat he produced a six cylinder gun.

He made no attempt to use it, but merely held it in the palm of his hand while he looked McAfee squarely in the eyes. The latter, smarting under the stigma of the entire disgraceful affair, humiliated beyond endurance by the accumulating dishonor to the McAfee name, and now hearing himself called a liar, lost all discretion and swung a quick, vicious haymaker at Brisbane's homely jaw.

SO SWIFT was the blow that the lawyer had no time to use the gun. Lee's knuckles were heard to crack at the impact, and Adam Brisbane went down, lurching face down to the floor near the door of his own office. Lee stepped back just in time to avoid the others gangling length from toppling upon him.

Then Lee stepped out into the barroom, making for the front door of the saloon.

But there chanced to be a single customer at the bar, who hailed him.

"Hi, fellow," spoke this customer; the voice was acutely familiar to McAfee and caused him to stop in his tracks, and face the man. It was Bill, or Duke, Ballard of the SQ. He was leaning against the bar now, twisting the ends of his mustaches.

"Hi, fellow," he went on. "What was all that racket back there? Been roughin' it with Adam? Called you a liar, didn't he? What for?"

Lee was still in a berserk rage from his encounter with Brisbane. He was in a perfect mood for fighting, and not at all in one for being baited or quizzed. The sight of Ballard, who was the original announcer of his shame, the man who had said, "You'll find your uncle waitin' fer you, at the ford," was to McAfee now like a red flag waved at a bull.

He stepped up to within a foot of the SQ foreman.

"What did he call me a liar for?" he repeated, answering the question. "Because I accused him of being there at my uncle's hanging. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe I went off half-cocked. But one thing I do know; *you* were there, Ballard, you dirty, low-down skunk."

Swish! Duke Ballard snatched a long pearl-handled gun from his holster. At the same instant Lee's knee came up and caught the man in the stomach. The impact caused Ballard to buckle amidships, just as the gun went off, and this first bullet missed McAfee. The second was fired just as Lee swung for Ballard's chin. Duke was ducking to avoid the blow, and the second shot also missed. McAfee jumped into a clinch, hugging Ballard with one arm while he sought to get in an uppercut with the other. In this clinch Ballard got in a blow himself. Too close to shoot, he brought the gun barrel down on Lee's head. Lee dropped to the floor, down and out. He would have been dead in another second, but for an interference. For Ballard, lustful to kill McAfee even without that kick in the stomach, threw the barrel down on the figure at his feet to shoot it full of holes.

Then—crack! From somewhere in the room came another shot. Adam Brisbane, on his knees in the door of his office, fired a bullet which saved McAfee's life, a shot of marvelous skill, for it knocked the gun from Ballard's fist without drawing a drop of blood. Ballard swung around, gunless, baring his teeth at Brisbane. The

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lawyer arose to his feet and came forward, covering the SQ man.

"Get out," he said to Duke Ballard. Reaching down he picked up the pearl handled weapon, extending it to Ballard muzzle first. "Get out. And the next time you try to shoot a man after he's down, in my bar, I'll kill you. Get out, before I do it now."

Ballard went. Brisbane took Lee McAfee back into his office and restored the young man to consciousness. When McAfee left for U Bar, hours later, he knew that the lawyer was his friend.

Chapter V

A SACRIFICE TO HONOR

WHY he returned to the U Bar he did not know. It was his, except for the formality of probation, but it was hateful to him; he did not want to see it again.

Still he went just the same. There was no place else to go except back to the Indian Territory. This he disliked above all to do; he did not want to tell his father about the blot on the McAfee name. Also Adam Brisbane had advised him to stick.

"The place is yours, young man, and it's a good one," Adam had reminded, during that second and more sympathetic conference.

"It's tainted," had been Lee's reply. "You yourself say Jud was a rustler."

"He didn't rustle the land, or the water-rights. He never even rustled a calf till two years ago, so all the stock over two years old is honest beef."

Later, Brisbane had brought up another point. "Young man," he had said, "I can see it's the disgrace that's preying on your mind more than anything else. All the more reason why you should stick. Stay here and win back respect for the McAfee name. Think it over."

Lee had been thinking it over ever since. However after reaching the ranch he was as miserably undecided as ever. The entire country was hateful to him. Although now, after his second conference with Brisbane, he had dropped the idea of prosecuting his uncle's executioners, he was none the less bitter toward them. He felt that the Cimarron Valley was not big enough to hold himself and them.

THE next morning he was still nervously perplexed, and spiritually out at elbows with the world. He occupied the early hours gloomily performing the chores of the ranch. He had just finished these when he saw a group of seven men riding toward him across his vega. The U Bar cattle herd had not turned out upon the open range for the summer, and these animals—Lee guessed them to be about four hundred in number, of all ages —were scattered over the meadow. He saw that the oncoming riders were angling back and forth, stopping now and then, apparently appraising the cattle. He saw one man point at a yearling and another nod. Here and there they rode among the stock, giving peculiar attention to the calves and yearlings. Lee, recalling what Brisbane had said about Jud's dishonest stock being less than two years old, turned a brick red. He foresaw another humiliation, and his temper was at a raw edge when the riders, having finally traversed the vega, reached the house.

"Are you Jud's nephew?" bawled a hawk-faced man with bushy eyebrows and unkempt, drooping mustaches.

"I am," snapped Lee.

"Glad to know you," returned the hawk-faced man. "I'm Sol Quiggs. "This here's Pink Jardine." He nodded toward a thin, loose-lipped and shifty-eyed rider with pink cheeks. "And this," went on Quiggs, motioning toward a swarthy man of stocky build and Italian cast of feature, "is Joe Sharpio. We're your nearest neighbors. My iron is the SQ, Pink runs the Fishtail, while Joe uses a Rafter Z."

The other four riders were cowboys who remained in the background. These Quiggs did not see fit to introduce.

"Now," Quiggs went on, "we mean well by you, young feller, and we figgered to drop around and see if we couldn't help you straighten this deal out." There was considerable of patronizing condescension in the tone, which irked Lee.

"What deal?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, this cow deal," came back

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Quiggs. "This mess Jud left the U Bar in. I assume you're honest, young feller, and would admire to see a wrong righted. Well, Jud stole the biggest part of them cattle out there from us three, his nearest neighbors. And so——"

"And so you led the mob which strung him up," snapped Lee.

Quiggs appeared painfully surprised. "Who? Us?" he exclaimed. "Why, of course not. We never had nothin' to do with that. Of course we'd expected it for a long time and Jud had it comin' to him. But——"

"That's enough," cut in Lee, sensing the other's insincerity. "I wouldn't believe you on a stack of Bibles. Now get through with the business you came here on and get out."

Quiggs' face blackened. Suddenly his hand shot toward his holstered hip. "Oho!" he cried. "You think you can talk like that to me, you young whelp, you——"

But here the swarthy Italian, Joe Sharpio, reached over and caught Quiggs' arm, whispered in his ear, and then took command of the debate himself.

"Eet ees no time for the hot heads, Meester McAfee," he offered oilily. "Let us remember we are gentlemans, ees eet not so? Naturally, my friend, you weel not weesh to stay in a country of such sad meesfortunes to your family. We, therefore, propose to lease thees rancho. Ees that not a fair proposeetion, Meester McAfee?"

Here the Fishtail man, Jardine, spoke up, although his shifty eyes looked everywhere but at Lee. "And we'll buy the cattle at a fair price, too, all except those we can identify as having been rustled from us."

THERE was a sting to the way Jardine put the matter, which offset in a measure the diplomatic speech of Sharpio. Lee was rather favorably impressed with the Italian. As a matter of fact the proposition in general appealed to him in more ways than one. It would be a quick way to wind up the estate and get himself out of the predicament.

Facing the last speaker, Jardine, he answered, "State the terms of rental you propose to pay, the price you offer per head for the cattle; then I'll consult my attorney, Mr. Brisbane, and give you a quick answer."

IT WAS Quiggs who flared up. "Terms hell!" the SQ rancher barked. "Who are you to quibble on terms? We'll pay what rent we please, and name our own price on what cattle, if any, weren't rustled. What can you do about it? You can't run the ranch by yourself. And not a puncher in the Territory would work on the U Bar after what happened to the last outfit. The layout's got a black eye as long as any McAfee runs it. There ain't nothin' fer you to do but to take what we offer and get out. How quick do ye reckon ye kin do that?"

Like a saw this speech of Sol Quiggs rasped against the stubborn streak in Lee McAfee. Until it had been spoken, he had not been able to make up his mind whether to go or stay. Now he knew, with a sudden finality, that he would stay. His jaw set hard.

"Quiggs," he said, "you can have your answer right now. It's no. I won't sell you a hoof or lease you an acre. You claim there are dishonest cattle out there in the vega. If so, I don't want 'em. If they're yours, take 'em with you as you go out. Brisbane tells me that the stuff two years old and up are on the square. There's no way of telling how many calves and yearlings in the bunch are not on the square, and for that reason I hereby *disclaim all of them.* I disclaim ownership of every yearling and long calf in the herd. If you do claim one, or ten, or all of them, take 'em and be damned. And you, Quiggs, if I ever see you on this place after today, I'll shoot you like a dog."

Too bitter to trust himself to further parley, Lee turned his back, walked into the house and slammed the door.

Outside he heard a medley of voices, first one and then another of the seven vis-

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tors advising this course or that. Quiggs was bawling for Lee to come out and do his shooting now. The Italian, Sharpio, was trying to calm him down, suggesting that there was nothing to be accomplished and that they might as well go home. Jardine was arguing the immediate acceptance of Lee's offer. What more could they ask? Jardine wanted to know. McAfee, in the presence of witnesses, had quitclaimed to them every U Bar yearling and calf old enough to wean. All right, take them, advised the pink cheeked owner of the Fishtail.

But some of those yearlings might have been stolen from other ranches, suggested Sharpio. Let those other ranches prove the loss then, argued Jardine, and Quiggs, calming down after a while, agreed with him.

INSIDE the house, Lee McAfee by now had unroped one of his packs. He had dumped the pack in the front room several days before on his gloomful arrival at the ranch. Now he rolled the canvas aside, disclosing blankets, clothes, armament. The latter was what Lee sought now, and he took up a shotgun, a repeating rifle and a .38 caliber six-shooter. He had brought these along from the Creek Nation farm. With the long arms he was an expert, as most farm bred boys are, but he had had but little practice with the revolver.

It was the rifle he selected now, and with which he returned to the door.

He saw that the seven men had ridden out into the vega. Six of them, all except Sharpio, were dashing in and out among the cattle, cutting long-age calves and yearlings. It was plain that they were going to accept Lee's offer. Although the young man admitted to himself that this offer had been the height of folly, he was not sorry of the outcome. He wanted to be rid of every head of stock to which the slightest suspicion could attach. If he were going to run the U Bar he wanted to start with a clean slate.

So he sat down sullenly on the porch with the rifle across his knees and watched the cutting of the U Bar young stuff. It was soon evident that the men were assembling not a portion, but all, of the yearlings and long-age calves. Lee wondered that they had the nerve to do it. What about the claims of still other neighbors? But that was their lookout, decided Lee. Maybe that was why the oily and diplomatic Sharpio was taking no personal part in the cut.

Apparently they were going to get about a hundred head. Lee decided that he would ride over to the exit gate, to see that they did not get any of the grown stock.

FIFTEEN minutes later he had saddled his horse and was riding toward the gate which gave into the main valley road. Arriving there, he waited for the drivers and their cut. He saw to the loading of his rifle, grimly assuring himself that if they tried to take a single head over two years old, he would contest to the last ditch.

But here they were coming now, and he would soon see. The cut was stringing out toward the main gate, the men hazing them along, while several old cows followed behind, bawling a protest against separation from not quite weaned calves.

Lee McAfee himself opened the gate, and the cut began straggling through into the main road. As Lee remounted, Sol Quiggs rode up to him.

"See here, young feller," snarled Quiggs, "you shot your mouth off something about me not coming on this ranch again. All right, that goes double. You keep off my layout, too. Understand?"

Lee nodded. "All right; that suits me."

"Don't forgit it, then," went on Quiggs. "The first time I see you on the SQ, bullets pop. And don't come buzzin' around to see that Summers gal, neither. Duke Ballard was tellin' me you got her dated fer a dance. Well, if she wants you fer a escort, she'll have to met you out in the main road."

In the jumbled press of other issues, Lee had almost forgotten the school-house dance. Now it was recalled sharply to his

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mind, and just as sharply he resolved that in no case would he consider going.

"Quiggs," he said, "I'm not likely to come buzzing around your house for any purpose, least of all to see Miss Summers. All I know about her is that her father helped lynch my uncle. But wait a minute, Quiggs; see that heifer yonder? The next to last one in the cut. She's a two-coming-three year old. Cut her back."

Quiggs looked around, merely as a form, for he knew quite well that he had slipped in an especially fine, blocky, two-coming-three year old heifer. But he was sure he could bluff this tenderfoot.

"Why," he began, "that's only a long year—"But here his argument subsided. For, turning back to Lee, his jaw collided with the muzzle of a Winchester rifle. Lee McAfee was sighting along the barrel, and his finger was on the trigger.

"Quiggs," said Lee McAfee, "if you move a finger, or say a thing except an order for that last puncher to cut the big heifer back, I pull the trigger and send your cheap, crooked soul to hell. If the heifer passes the gate, I pull the trigger anyway. Now do as you please."

QUIGGS paled, jerking his head back. But the rifle muzzle followed and clung to the point of his jaw. He could, of course, with a nod to any of his men cause Lee to be shot from his saddle. But he knew, too, that the young man's nervous finger would squeeze its own trigger first. Quiggs was dead if he batted an eye, or if the heifer passed the gate.

"Cut her back, boys," he ordered huskily. A puncher expertly spurred a horse in and the heifer was cut back into the vega. The yearling which had been tailender in the cut strung through. Quiggs himself made a move to follow through the gate.

"Stay where you are, Quiggs," ordered Lee, not lowering his rifle an inch. "Stay where you are till your gang and the cut get out of sight down the road. Then you can go, and stay gone."

So it was done. Lee held Quiggs a hostage till the rest were out of sight. After which he let Quiggs go. But even then he held the rifle steady till Quiggs was beyond its range.

CHAPTER VI

"HORSE OF ANOTHER COLOR"

THE next day Lee went to Folsom for a definite purpose. Sol Quiggs had made one remark which gave him considerable worry.

"There ain't a puncher in the Territory who'd work on the U Bar after what happened to the last outfit," had remarked Quiggs.

Was that true? To operate the ranch, it was quite certain that Lee must have help. Although he was hard muscled and strong limbed, the irrigation game was new to him, as well as the scheme of running range stock on open summer pasture. First thing to do was to hire a crew.

It was his idea to seek the advice of Adam Brisbane. He was ashamed of his first distrust of the lawyer, and more than willing to accept his friendship now. In any case Folsom was the nearest trading point, and Adam's saloon was the most likely place there to encounter an out-of-work cow hand. Lee hoped to run across some unprejudiced nomad from another range, who would be willing to help on the U Bar.

But when he arrived at Adam's saloon he found the lawyer's sanctum locked. Pedro the bartender told him that Brisbane had gone out without leaving word as to his probable return. Lee, who was not a drinking man, bought one ginger ale to justify his presence, then sat down at a card table to size up whatever customers might come along.

Just before noon, four came in. They were all booted and gunned cowboys whom Lee recognized as the four yesterday in the train of Quiggs, Jardine and Sharpio. Obviously there was nothing to be gained by accosting them.

It was soon apparent that the four men themselves were more socially inclined. As they lined up at the bar they saw Lee, and

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immediately began winking at each other and cat-calling various and sundry taunts.

"Look, Ike," jeered one "there's our pert young rifle-totin' neighbor from the U Bar. Wonder if that Winchester he was pokin' at the old man yestiddy was loaded. D'ye reckon he's as mean as he looks?"

"No," returned Ike, a puncher whose head was small and whose ears were disproportionately long, "he ain't mean. He's just so dang new to this range he's pickin' the wrong fodder. Been eatin' loco weed, I'll bet. Yezzir, ain't no other way to account fer that feller. Any lone tenderfoot what'd buck the SQ, the Rafter Z and the Fishtail all at once is shore locoed and a long way from home. What's your ideas on that subjeck, Puny?"

PUNY, a beefy elephant, swallowed his dram and then leered at McAfee while he licked his thick lips.

"No, Ike," refuted Puny. "I don't think he's loco. I got him sized up as mean—real honest-to-God, ornery mean. Don't you see he's packin' a six-gun today? It's all shiny and new, and I'll bet he jest bought it to perforate Quiggs, or maybe the Duke, or maybe you, Ike, if you don't watch out. I understand he got mad the other day and kicked Duke Ballard in the stomick. Didn't you hear about that? Well, he did; right here in this bar. I sure hope he don't start kickin' me in my stomick. He's mean all right; I'll bet he's hopin' right now one of us fellers starts somethin'."

Ike had a bright idea. "Say, I know a way to find out whether he's mean or just plain loco. 'Slidell"—Ike turned to the fourth of the quartette, a lantern-jawed skeleton in chaps who had not yet spoken —"Slide, you ketch a barfly and go over there and stick it in his ear. If he takes a slap at that pore barfly, and pens it up so it can't git out, then he's mean. But if he takes a slap at you, Slide, why then he's loco. I claim that there scientifick test'll stop all argument, for the benefits and peace of mind of all concerned."

"By Golly, you're right," agreed the lean and hungry Slidell. He stood there for a moment, arms akimbo, gaping at Lee with an expression of puzzled interest such as he might have directed toward a strange animal at the zoo. Then he turned to the bar, searching its length for a fly. Finally seeing one, he made a swipe at it with his palm; but the insect escaped. Slidell then began moving here and there along the bar, snatching at other flies, all of which were too quick for him.

"Doggone the luck; help me ketch one, Ike," the lanky man complained. Whereupon not only Ike, but the other cowboys, too, began slapping the bar, bent on the capture of a fly.

Whether they were deliberately missing the insects or whether they intended to put one in his ear, Lee did not know. One thing was certain—the razz had gone far enough. If it went further, with him as its victim, life would not be livable for Lee McAfee in the Cimarron Valley. To suffer shame was enough, without enduring ridicule.

He must do something. What? Fight? He wore a .38 six-gun, in whose draw he was not swift. Face to face with an even break he knew he would be no match for even one of these four bullies.

But just now they were not facing him. Their backs were toward him, as they catcalled the most deliberately insulting of jeers and grabbed at flies. Just at the moment, Lee saw a group of a half dozen partially drugged flies on his own table. Some previous customer had spilled beer there. Pedro the bartender, although he was continually mopping the mahogany bar, paid little attention to the tables. Hence a number of flies, legs askew and easy prey, were half doped in a stain of beer before young McAfee.

With a nervy inspiration Lee drew his .38. There was no call for speed, because the backs of the baiters were toward him. He now jabbed the gun muzzle into the beer spill. Some of the flies buzzed away, but one stuck to the end of the barrel.

"You men looking for a fly?" he asked in an even voice. "Here's one."

The four whirled, to find Lee pointing a pistol squarely at their own compact group of amazed mugs.

"Here's one," repeated Lee, "on the end of this gun. If you want it very bad, come pick it off."

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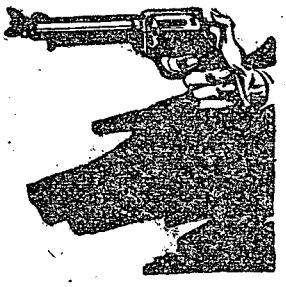
They saw Lee's thumb deliberately cock the hammer of the gun.

The lantern jaw of Slidell dropped an inch. Puny's eyes almost popped from his puffy cheeks. It was the hand of Ike which dropped from the bar to his hip. But there it stayed. For the fly-defiled muzzle of Lee's gun moved a trifle, exactly covering Ike's heart.



"Pick it off or I'll shoot it off," went on McAfee.

Ike paled; his eyes began to water as they blinked at the gun. But the gun left him to train upon Slidell, as the lank one's knees bent a trifle and a purposeful gleam lit, then died, in his eyes.

"Or maybe you want this fly, Slide," suggested McAfee.

Slidell grinned a sickly grin. "That ain't the fly I was lookin' for, mister," he admitted.

AT THIS juncture a voice came from the saloon door. "What's going on in here, gentlemen?" Lee did not look at the speaker. The four at the bar did, however, and saw Adam Brisbane. They also saw that Adam was looking at them, not very pleasantly, and that his right hand was extended around under the tail of his long, black coat. They suddenly remembered that Brisbane invariably sided with a minority, after which the minority generally became a majority.

It was Lee who, without looking at him, answered Brisbane.

"It's a game; we call it—'who's got the fly?' "

The barroom was tensely silent for some seconds. Lee let the hammer down under his thumb, then raised it, then let it down again, never taking the muzzle from its aim on Slidell.

"What's the object of the game?" asked Brisbane from the door.

"I never played it before," admitted McAfee. "But Ike says the object's to put the fly in somebody's ear. Whoever gets it in his ear loses the game. I wouldn't have thought Ike'd have suggested a game like that, because his ears are so long you couldn't miss 'em. You get it right now, Ike." Lee rose, swung the gun over to cover Ike's ear, took a step toward him, and for the third time his thumb cocked the hammer.

Ike ducked; his chin dodged to his chest and in spite of himself his hand slapped to his ear. Then he jumped six feet toward the saloon door. Tripping over a cuspidor he sprawled on the floor. But he scrambled to his hands and knees and went crawling on toward the door.

His three companions were not far after him. "That's right," cried Adam Brisbane, standing aside to let them pass; "go out doors and play that game." The lawyer had never removed his hand from behind his back. Among his other talents, Brisbane had a reputation for dazzling speed.

WHEN the four cowboys were out on the walk, one of them, Slidell, turned and gave vent to a belated defiance.

"You're due for a cleanin', Brisbane; this is the second time you've bucked our crowd. Maybe the third time'll be the charm."

"All right, charmer," flung back Adam, his own eyes as cold as frost. "I heard something this morning that makes me well satisfied to buck your crowd, as you call it. Go home and tell that to Quiggs."

When the four routed cowboys had passed up the walk, the lawyer turned to Lee McAfee. "Go into my office, young man. I want to talk to you."

Lee holstered his six-gun and went with Adam back into the cubby-hole. When they were seated there, Brisbane asked, "What were you trying to do? Commit suicide?"

Lee explained the genesis of the fly game. Brisbane stroked his lean homely jaw, then began pacing the floor, hands raised high behind his coat tails.

"You've got a nerve all right," he admitted after listening to the account, "which you may need again later. You're also liable to need some discretion, which you haven't shown so far."

"What was this new thing you learned this morning," asked Lee, "which makes

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you glad to buck Quiggs' game?"

"Oh," returned the lawyer, "I heard about that calf roundup in your vega yesterday. Gossip travels fast in this valley, and as I get it you let Quiggs and company take every yearling and long-age calf on the U Bar. That right?"

Lee admitted that it was, detailing the exact happenings at his ranch yesterday, substantially confirming what Adam had heard by way of gossip.

BRISBANE dropped into his swivel chair and elevated his long legs to the desk. For a full five minutes he lay there gazing at the ceiling, tapping five fingers against five, in thought.

"McAfee," he said at last, "I owe you and your kin an apology. When you came in here the other day I was sure of your uncle's guilt; now I'm not so sure."

"You're not?" cried Lee eagerly. "Why?"

"There were five points," began Adam, preparing to list them on as many fingers, "which caused the entire valley to believe Jud a rustler. First, for years there have been subdued accusations to that effect, both from Cimarron stockmen of repute and from cowmen on the next creek south, the Carrumpaw. Nothing definite, just a lot of gossipy mutterings that became more pointed as time went on. The reason for the mutterings was Jud's inability to explain his calf crops, and his sudden accessions and diminutions of young stock.

"Second, there was that photograph of the calf branding act, with the muley cow standing by, coupled with the fact that when I showed the picture to Jud, he rushed home and dehorned all his stuff. Third, fourth and fifth, there was the testimony of three neighbors that they had separately eye-witnessed Jud in the act of wide-looping."

"That makes it look bad for him," admitted Lee.

"But now," resumed Brisbane, "the last three of those points lose weight with me. Why? Because yesterday's roundup in your vega indicates a possible, even probable, conspiracy among Quiggs, Jardine and Sharpio. I had always known that Quiggs was hostile to your uncle, and was willing to discount his testimony. But I had thought Sharpio and Jardine friendly, reasonably upright and unprejudiced neighbors. Especially Sharpio, who once, when your uncle had a fever, took him into his own home and nursed him back to health. Also, both Jardine and Sharpio testified in your uncle's favor in the water-right suit, McAfee versus Quiggs, in which I was Jud's counsel.

"But yesterday all three of those ranchers approached you, as a unit, with that absurd lease proposition, apparently trying to railroad you out of the country. Worse, they accepted your own ridiculous offer of the hundred yearlings and long calves. No

honest man or men could have taken them. Any fool would know that *all* the young stuff could not have been stolen. The U Bar cows must have raised some honest calves. It strikes me that only crooks could have snatched at such an unfair indemnity."

"Where does this get us?" ask Lee.

"It gets us to a reasonable doubt of Jud's guilt," answered Adam, his feet dropping to the floor as he pounded the desk with a fist. "It disqualifies, in my mind, three of five clues against your uncle. Leaving but two. One of those two is a snapshot. But that was furnished by Bill Ballard, a Quiggs man, which strikes it also from the column of unprejudiced evidence. Leaving but one. And this is only a series of whisperings and rumors. Supported, they were convincing. Alone, they are not."

"But it looks bad that Judson could not explain his flexible calf tally," reminded Lee.

"This evidence of a conspiracy among Quiggs, Sharpio and Jardine looks worse," snapped Brisbane. "Until I heard about that raw deal yesterday afternoon I believed Jud McAfee guilty. Now it's a horse of another color."

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CHAPTER VII

CURLY SMITH AGAIN

IT REMAINS to be seen whether Quiggs was right when he claimed I wouldn't be able to hire any ranch hands," said Lee, after Brisbane had congratulated him on his decision to stick on the U Bar. "Looks like I ought to start irrigating right now. That was why I came in here in the first place. Thought if I hung around your saloon I might pick up an out-of-work hand."

"Not a bad idea," admitted Brisbane, "but keep out of the barroom. Those SQ waddies might come back looking for you. I tell you, make this office your headquarters for today. I'll tell Pedro to send in to you any likely looking customers who drop in for a drink, providing he does not already know they're hooked up with an outfit. Personally, I've got to take a ride up the valley on a business errand. But make yourself at home here, and keep out of trouble."

The lawyer left his office and saloon, going up the street to Jim Pixlee's livery barn, where he hired a horse for a short ride up the valley. He was thus absent from town several hours, it being mid-afternoon when he returned.

"Have any luck?" he asked McAfee, on entering his office.

"None whatever," responded Lee gloomily. "Pedro sent in several out-of-work and down-and-out ranch hands, but not a one of them would take a chance on the U Bar. They had all heard what happened to the last crew, and turned me down cold."

"Humph!" muttered Brisbane. "That makes it bad, doesn't it?"

"Sure does. I've never worked an irrigated farm and don't know how to go about it."

"It's not that," replied Adam. "Personally I'm not worrying about your hay crop, or even your cow herd, for there is more at stake than such items as those. If my latter suspicions are correct, your uncle and his help were victims of a vicious conspiracy. That being the case, no life or property in the whole valley is safe until those conspirators are run down. Suspicion points to Quiggs and his foreman Ballard, with Jardine and Sharpio as probable confederates. But what we need are facts, not suspicions. You and I must elect ourselves detectives on the case, you keeping a check on rural and I on urban developments. But to handle your end, you must have the assistance and protection of at least one good segundo at the U Bar, some fellow who is equally quick with his thinker and his gun hand. Then if we just had a fourth partner in our scheme, an under cover partner, someone we could put on the SQ as a spy, we'd be hard to beat. All we've got to do is to get the deadwood on Quiggs; after that the honest stockmen of the Cimarron, men like Andy Summers, will do the rest."

Lee frowned at the mention of Summers' name.

"Summers was one of Jud's lynchers," he reminded Adam. "You forget about me finding the tobacco bag at the ford."

"Nevertheless," countered Adam, "I do not believe Summers has a crooked bone in his body. If he was there, he had a good reason to be, and you can bet on it. But speaking of him gives me a bright idea. His daughter Betty, teacher at the Cat Canyon school, boards with Quiggs. I'll enroll her in our cause. She can be our fourth partner, a spy on the SQ."

THE idea pleased Adam so much that he rubbed his hands together and smiled a homely smile. He was warming to the plot now, being the kind who never enters a case except with his entire heart and soul. It had been many a year since anything had intrigued him as much as the affair at hand.

"But I dont want Summers' daughter for a partner," objected Lee stubbornly. "I believe Summers murdered my uncle—there's no other word for it—and I shall accuse him on sight. In the meantime I shall hardly ally myself with his daughter."

"Your argument works both ways," replied Adam. "Look at the girl's side of it. You accuse Summers of participation in an illegal hanging. No doubt the girl would like to clear her father of such complicity. Therefore your cause is hers; she

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has the same motive as you for turning the searchlight of truth on the case—the erasure of a stain on family honor."

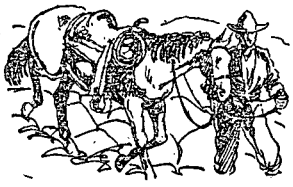
Lee was unconvinced. "I don't want anything to do with Summers' daughter," he insisted bull-headedly. "If you use her as a witness or a spy you'll have to do it without my collusion. I'll not talk to her. Except," he added, as a painful recollection came to him, "to see her just once between now and next Friday, to cancel an ill-conceived arrangement I made to take her to a dance. Naturally I wouldn't go to that shindig, least of all take her, for the whole Cimarron Valley."

"Don't know as I blame you for not wanting to go to the school dance," remarked Brisbane. "But that part's all right. There's forty punchers along the Cimarron who'd give their saddles to take your place; Betty Summers will not lack for an escort. Why, I may even take her myself."

Lee had no mind to discuss the point further. Instead he returned to the original issue. "We haven't enrolled our third partner yet," he reminded. "What about the bright and shiny faced ranch hand? He's the fellow I'm looking for."

BRISBANE was pensive for a moment, then answered.

"Why, come to think of it, I saw a likely looking prospect loafing around Pixlee's barn when I was up there to hire a horse today. He was a stranger to this town, and I liked his looks. I sized him up as the kind who wouldn't scare very easily, and if he's new to the country, the chances are he has no prejudices for or against Quiggs."



"Maybe I'd better go up and have a talk with him," said Lee. rising to his feet.

Adam arose briskly himself. "I'll go with you," he said; "because Ike and Slidell might still be in town."

"You don't have to come," objected Lee. "I don't need a nurse."

"Maybe you do and maybe you don't," overruled Brisbane. He led the way out into the bar and then to the street.

Lee followed, and they had no more than stepped upon the walk when they ran into the Italian rancher, Joe Sharpio, owner of the Rafter Z.

By now Lee had a picture in his mind of the sequence of ranches below town. The first place below Folsom was Jardine's Fishtail, the second was the Rafter Z, the third the U Bar, and fourth came Sol Quiggs' SQ.

JUST now Lee heard Sharpio greeting himself and Adam with disarming friendliness. The Italian's smile exposed every one of his exceptionally fine, even teeth, as he extended a hand toward McAfee.

"Good afternoon, my friends," he greeted. "And you, Meester McAfee, it pleases me to see you, for I weesh to express my great sorrow at the conduct of our neighbor, Meester Queegs. Was it not plenty bad that he take your hundred yeerling? Me! I am mortify to theenk of such theeng as theese."

Lee avoided the man's outstretched hand. Looking him sharply in the eyes he replied, "It mortifies you, does it?"

Brisbane broke in to ask, "You were there yourself, Sharpio, and helped drive those yearlings away, weren't you? Your apology comes with poor grace."

Sharpio raised his broad brown palms and shrugged. "Who? Me?" he cried. "Never. I refused to take not even one seengle calf of theese yeerling. Queegs and Jardine take all. How we know wheech calf belong to who? Maybe Jud take ten calf from neighbor, maybe feefty, maybe hundred; *quien sabe?* And even eef we know how many, then how we know who from? I refuse take seengle head of those yeerling; Peenk Jardine and Queegs take all. Is it not so, Meester McAfee?"

Lee grumblingly admitted that Sharpio had personally not assisted in the cut, but had merely stood by. However he was about to make some sharp query about why Sharpio had approached the ranch in company with Quiggs, thus appearing to be his partner in the general plan of railroading himself from the ranch, when Adam Brisbane suddenly stepped upon

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Lee's toe, cutting short the remark.

The lawyer now adopted a congenial front and took Sharpio warmly by the hand.

"Ah, you have a nice sense of justice, Mr. Sharpio," he said. "I congratulate you. If you had taken a third of those yearlings, you would have fallen in my respect; as it is, I honor you. I am sure you will make a good neighbor to my young friend."

"Eet ees the truth," cried Sharpio, expanding under the flattery. "Eet shall please me to asseest heem in any way. My ranch and my house ees hees; I want vairy much to be nice friend."

AGAIN Joe extended a hand to Lee; this time the latter, knowing that Adam had a reason for playing up to the Italian, took it and forced a smile.

"I appreciate your attitude, Sharpio," he said. "Let us indeed be friends."

A moment later the Italian entered the saloon, while Adam and Lee passed on up the walk.

"Now get this," said the lawyer, once they were out of Sharpio's hearing; "we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by warming up to the wop. He listens like a hypocrite to me, but our best strategy is to pal up to him. It's easy to see he's more cautious than Quiggs and Jardine. The latter pair let their avarice outrun their discretion. But Sharpio had brains enough to realize that the acceptance of every U Bar yearling would smell like the bone-picking feast of hungry buzzards. So he refuses his split. Of course he may be innocent. But let's play up to him, on the off chance of his making a slip. His ranch is next above yours. Suppose you ride up and call on him now and then, on the pretense, say, of borrowing some piece of equipment! Warm up to him, and maybe he'll overreach himself in his friendly exuberance, giving something away."

Lee agreed to this procedure, and a moment later the two men arrived at Pixlee's livery barn. Pixlee was seated on the walk, braiding a rawhide quirt.

"Hello, Pix," greeted Brisbane. "What became of that curly headed stranger I saw sitting out here with you a while ago?"

Just then Lee McAfee saw something peculiar about the environs of this barn, which reminded him of the last livery barn he had visited, the one sixty-seven miles east at Kenton, Oklahoma. Here, too, someone had been poisoning birds with doped meat, for Lee saw six or seven dead magpies lying in the street near by.

"He went back to the hotel," Pixlee answered Brisbane. "He's just stoppin' overnight, on his way from Kenton to Taos. Waitin' here while his horse gets shod. Why? Is he wanted for a shootin' or something?"

McAfee broke in. "You say he's from Kenton, huh? And curly headed? And by any chance is he the one who's been poisoning those magpies?" Lee motioned to the dead birds in the street.

"Why, yes, he was," admitted the liveryman. "There's no law ag'in' it, is they? This feller, Smith he calls hisself, seems to have declared war on them pests. Spun me a yarn about it, he did. About three months ago he bought him the best cuttin' pony in the Oklahoma Panhandle, and put his own private brand on the animal. One day he's fordin' the lower Cimarron when this cayuse gets bogged, goin' in belly deep. Smith jumps from the saddle to safety, but the hoss hisself can't get out. So Smith walks twelve mile to a ranch, borrows a team and drives back. When he gits there the magbirds have been workin' twelve hours on that pony, and have plumb amputated that fresh brand. They've got a helluva hole bored. 'You could have stood off and throwed your hat in it,' said Smith. He sure musta thought a lot of that pony for his eyes got kinda watery when he told me about it. He hitched on the team and yanked the hoss out, still living. In fact, he got it to town and worked on that sore for a week. But the hoss died and Smith's been warrin' on magbirds ever since. Al-

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lers carries a two-ounce bottle of strychnine in his pocket, and ever time he happens to be lazin' around some livery barn or corral, where magbirds is thick, he helps hisself to another jag of revenge."

LEE turned to Brisbane. "I know this Smith, and he's all right. Met him as I was coming through Kenton and shared a room with him that night. In fact, he spun me that same pet-pony-in-the-bog yarn. Maybe he'll go to work on the U Bar. It'd suit me to the ground if he would, for I took quite a liking to Curly Smith."

"Let's look him up at the hotel," returned Adam.

But at the hotel they missed Smith again. The proprietor said he had gone down to the drugstore for the purpose of refilling some small empty drug bottle he carried. The hotelman was quite sure Smith was a dope fiend. He was enlarging this theory when Brisbane and McAfee broke away.

They found Smith at the drug store, waiting for the clerk to refill his two ounce strychnine bottle. Sure enough he was Lee's friend from Kenton, and was as glad to see Lee as McAfee was to see him.

"Curly," asked Lee, when greetings were over and Adam Brisbane had been introduced, "how about taking a job on my ranch, the U Bar?"

"Your ranch!" exclaimed the cowboy. "I understood it was your uncle's ranch."

This brought on the necessity of relating recent events. Lee went on to explain the U Bar's unsavory reputation, admitting that five men had turned down jobs there today. He said he wouldn't blame Curly for declining to come himself.

When he was through, Smith slapped him on the shoulder and smiled as broadly, almost, as Joe Sharpio had smiled at the encounter in front of the saloon. Only Smith's smile was as open and guileless as Sharpio's had been guileful; it brightened the spirits of Lee McAfee as nothing had brightened them since his arrival at the U Bar.

"Feller," said Curly Smith, "you've hired a hand. I was headin' fer Taos, but a job's a job, and yourn looks good to me. And if they's anybody around here objects to me shovin' my boots under a U Bar bunk, why, let 'em tell me face to face. After that, it'll be *my* turn to tell a funny story."

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNKINDEST CUT

McAFEE was mightily pleased, confident that Curly would make a loyal and efficient aide. After discussing the general situation for a few minutes, he left Smith and Brisbane in the drug store and went up the street several doors to buy a pair of irrigation boots.

While he was gone Brisbane told Curly all he knew about the neighborhood mixup. He told of his own original theory, still popularly held along the Cimarron, that Jud McAfee had been a systematic rustler. Then he explained his later theory, brought about by the visit of Quiggs, Jardine and Sharpio yesterday and the hundred yearlings.

Curly Smith whistled. "Gee! something rotten in Bismark, as the poet says," he exclaimed. "Now just who and how many were present at Jud McAfee's farewell necktie party?"

"We don't know," replied Adam. "Some say the entire valley was there; some say that when the lower valleymen got there the upper valleymen already had Jud hanged. But no individual will admit his own presence, or charge the presence of any specific person. You know how it is at those affairs. Everybody in general and nobody in particular. Lee is dead sure Andy Summers was there. Summers' ranch is about thirty-five miles down the valley."

"I know Andy Summers," answered Curly. "Worked for him two years and sure thought a lot of him. Him and his wife couldn't have treated me any better if I'd been their son. And say, feller, they got a right purty darter, if anybody happens to ask you."

Just then the front door of the store opened to admit another customer, and Brisbane said, "True enough, Curly; and here she is now." Raising his voice so that Betty Summers might hear, he continued.

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"Speak of an angel, and you hear the rustle of her wings."

Smith, who had been facing the rear, whirled about. In a trice his sombrero was off and his broad face was a hundred per cent. grin.

Betty recognized him immediately.

"Why, Curly Smith," she greeted. "What are you doing so far from home? Did you stop in to see the folks as you came up the valley?"

"Sure did, Miss Betty," answered Smith. "I stopped over last night with your pap. Him and your ma's well. And you're sure lookin' considerable nice yourself, Miss Betty."

MISS SUMMERS laughed, discounting his flattery, recalling that in the two years Curly had lived with the Summers he had become apt at it. "Are you going to help dad with the hay again this summer?" she asked.

"No," answered Curly. "I done got me a job further up the crik. I'm foreman, cook and stable boy on the U Bar. The boss ain't been around here long, I understand. Young feller by the name of Lee McAfee. Know him?"

Betty had nodded to Adam Brisbane on her entrance. She knew the homely lawyer quite well, and liked him. Now she was surprised to hear Adam answer Smith's question for her.

"Yes, she knows him," said Brisbane.

Betty looked up quickly at him then her eyes dropped before his own steady gaze and she colored a bright scarlet. What did Brisbane know about her flirtation with McAfee at the pasture bars?

"That so?" asked Curly innocently. He had noted the girl's confusion and had a mind to tease her. "Gee! That feller gets around pretty fast, don't he? He ain't been here a week yet, either." The cowboy had inverted his hat on a finger end and was making it spin like a top.

Betty continued to look from the corners of her black eyes at Brisbane. "Are you going to the Cat Canyon dance Friday, Adam?" she asked carelessly, wondering how much he knew.

The lawyer had no time to answer, for Curly Smith breezed, "A dance Friday night, eh? Ain't that grand! And I got here just in time to take you to said dance. That is, assuming you're not already dated up by this fast-working McAfee. Now where is this Wildcat Canyon and shall we go in a buggy, or ride hossback?"

Betty knew very well he was only trying to tease her, and that he had not the slightest expectation of being allowed to take her to the dance. To get back at him, and not having the slightest idea that Lee McAfee was about to enter the store door just behind her, she answered, "No, Curly, you're too late. Just as you feared, I am going with your boss, Mr. McAfee of the U Bar."

"Goshomighty!" exclaimed Curly, his eyes wide open. "He sure is a fast worker, ain't he? Eh, Brisbane? He don't let no grama sod grow under his boots. But he must have known you was in here, Betty" —Smith was now looking over the girl's shoulder at the door—"'cause here he comes now."

From behind Betty, Lee himself spoke, "I'm ready to go home now if you are, Curly. Better get your horse."

The girl spun around, coming face to face with Lee. In the sharp embarrassment of the situation she would have been glad to disappear through the floor.

She wished that she had bitten her tongue off before uttering her last speech. No doubt Lee had heard it, she was thinking, and if so how would he construe it? She knew about the catastrophe at the U Bar. Under the weight of it, no doubt the young man had forgotten all about the dance engagement. Now he had caught her bringing it up, almost boastfully, in a public place. She knew she was as red as a poppy as she faced him now, so suddenly and inopportunely. With a desperate effort she managed a smile and greeted him.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. McAfee? Curly Smith here's an old friend of ours; he used to work for my father."

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She extended her hand. Lee ignored it. His eyes did not change expression, nor did his features crack into the faintest resemblance of pleasantry. His only acknowledgment of the greeting was a slight and stiff bow. The only words which he addressed to her were, "Miss Summers, this meeting is not as unfortunate as it would otherwise have been; for it gives me a chance to say that it will be impossible for me to attend the dance Friday night."

THEN, looking directly past Betty, Lee continued, "I'll be ready in twenty minutes, Curly. You can find me at Pixlee's barn." Turning abruptly, Lee McAfee walked out of the store.

Fortunately the drug clerk had not yet come from the rear; for thus no one witnessed Betty's humiliation, except Curly Smith and Adam Brisbane. There was seen a poignant sting to it, coming as it did just after the girl's mention of Lee as though he had been an intimate friend.

She had been thinking a good deal of the handsome brown-eyed stranger these last few days. Since her sixteenth year she had flirted harmlessly with the Cimarron punchers, watched them come and go at her father's house, invariably paying her court, and with youthful romanticism she had often dreamed of the one who should come—and never go. That day, not a week past now, when she had ridden home with Lee McAfee, lingering with him at the pasture bars, some far-seeing prescience had telegraphed a message to her heart. "This," said the message, "is he, who will never go, except with you."

Such was the message which had come to her in the golden sunset of that spring day, and, whether she acknowledged it to be a warning or promise, she cherished it.

Then she had heard, as who had not, of the tragedy to the house of McAfee. Jud McAfee had been hanged as a thief. Great as the shock was, the girl's reaction had not been so much sorrow for Jud's sake—she had just barely known Jud—as sympathy for the nephew. How easy it had been for the sensitive mind of the girl to picture the loneliness of his homecoming! Its brutal insult! Its dour and dismal tragedy!

How she had wanted to comfort Lee! Her heart had bled for him, had shared the hurt. Spiteful talk around the Quiggs table increased tenfold her sympathy. She had resolved that were she to see Lee McAfee herself, she would show him that he had at least one true and loyal friend in the valley.

And now, here in this store, she had met him! Receiving a sharp and deliberate snub. It cut her like a whip. Adam Brisbane saw the strained muscles of her face, her quivering lips, saw the big wells form in her eyes. Quickly the tall, homely lawyer stepped to her side, and his arm went around her.

"Steady now," he whispered in her ear. "Pay no attention to that, Betty. He thinks your father was in the gang which strung up his Uncle Jud. Naturally he's——"

The girl turned and caught Adam by the arms tightly. "He thinks—that?" she cried. "But it's not true."

"He thinks it, anyway," explained Brisbane. "Your dad dropped something on the ground and Lee picked it up."

"But it's not true," repeated Betty. "Father wouldn't——"

"I know he wouldn't; but McAfee don't know it. He thinks— But wait a minute, Curly; where you going?" The last was addressed to Smith, who was half way through the door.

"I'm gonna ketch that scissorbill and beat him up," said Curly. "And then quit him cold. Think I'd work fer a guy like that? Why, that stiff-necked——"

"Hold your horses, Smith," cut in Brisbane. Deserting Betty, he went to the door and pulled the cowboy back inside. "Just because Lee McAfee is on a temperamental toot is all the more reason why us three, his only friends in this valley, have got to cut out all sentiment and get down to brass tacks. Remember it was his uncle that got hanged, not ours. It's him everybody's pointing their fingers at, not us. Now you two come over here in the corner and get educated."

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THE lanky lawyer led Betty and Smith, like a stern schoolmaster might lead aside a pair of errant pupils, to a corner of the store where he delivered them a disciplinary harangue.

Its text was that they must band together to help McAfee, whether he would or no. He asked Betty to swallow her pride and overlook a rudeness, as Adam himself had done on the occasion of Lee's first visit. Lee had good reason to suspect Andy Summers. Let them conspire then to clear Andy, to prove the innocence of Jud McAfee and thus heal Lee's smarting wounds, and save the Cimarron Valley from a repetition of whatever crimes the real offenders might have committed.

He then made them familiar with every detail of evidence which he possessed himself, on either side, even showing them the small, circular photograph which Ballard had brought to town. In summary he said:

"Overlook Lee's sorehead incivility; turn the other cheek, and heap coals of fire on his head. And now for those brass tacks I spoke of. You, Curly Smith, go out and help him run the U Bar; keep your guns loaded and your eyes on Quiggs. And don't get to dozing if Ballard, Jardine or Sharpio come along, either. And you, Betty, yours is a mean rôle maybe, but nevertheless necessary. I want you to play spy in the Quiggs household. Find anything you can which might prove a conspiracy directed at Judson McAfee. It's a tough assignment for a girl, but there's a good deal of peace and happiness at stake along the creek, and I ask you to do it. Will you?"

"You forget school only lasts till the end of the week," reminded Betty. "Friday is the last day. After that I shall not be boarding with the Quiggs."

"But you can look out for what you can find till then, won't you?" insisted Adam. "Much might be done in a few days."

"Very well," agreed Betty.

"And speaking of Friday," went on Brisbane, "I want you to go to that school house dance, both of you. Curly, you take Betty. Betty, you'll report to Curly anything you've found at Quiggs' which bears on the case. I'll be at the dance myself, ready to issue further instructions. Now, Curly, are you with me? Will you go out to the U Bar and help Lee, and on Friday night take Betty to the dance?"

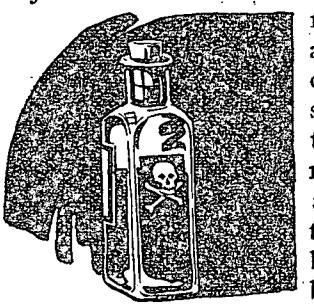
"I'd go to hell if I could take Miss Betty to a dance," affirmed Curly, his good-natured grin restored.

"And you'll go with him, Betty?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now Curly, run along after Lee and go with him to the ranch."

Just then the clerk came in from the rear; he had had a hard time locating the jug of strychnine crystals, but had finally found it and filled Smith's tiny, two-ounce bottle. The cowboy placed it in the inside pocket of his coat and left the store.



Adam was left alone with Betty Summers. Whether it was because of his humane desire to salve the recent wound in her pride, whether it was because that being a lawyer he simply could not help presenting the best possible brief, or whether he had really made a shrewd and accurate guess—in either of these three cases he wound up his argument with the following clincher:

"Betty, the main reason that McAfee boy is so stand-offish is because he's dead in love with you. So, thinking your dad was at the ford, it hurts him all the worse."

"How perfectly absurd!" exclaimed Miss Summers, staring at Adam.

"It's a fact," assured Brisbane, very solemnly. "He got all riled up the other day telling me he did not want to see you again. If you were no more than an ordinary girl he had met on the road he would not have given you a second thought. As it is, thinking of you all the time, brooding and brooding on the whole affair, he naturally——"

"Adam Brisbane," flushed Betty, "you haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about. Don't ever dare to say such a thing again. He hates me. If it wasn't that dad's name has been mentioned in this matter, I'd have nothing to do with it. As it is I'll find out what I can at the

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Quiggs' house and tell Curly, when he takes me to the dance. Good-by, I'll see you then."

After she had gone, Adam decided that he had handled his jury of two with just the right finesse.

Chapter IX

A RIGHT HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

THE next morning Lee McAfee and Curly Smith actively began the operation of the U Bar ranch. The first thing to do, advised Curly, was to get the stock off the vega so they could start irrigating.

"Wintering stock on hay land," explained the Kenton cowboy, "don't hurt the stand none except when you flood it with water. But when you flood it, the cow hoofs puddle the adobe soil and make it as hard as Pharaoh's heart, which keeps later moisture from gettin' to the roots at all. We'll haze the stock over there into the hoss pasture. We can hold 'em there coupla weeks then grass'll be long enough to turn them out on the range."

The shift was made, and the vega field freed of stock.

The next thing to do was to get water into the irrigation ditch; wherefore the two men took spades and axes and followed the ditch up and about a mile to where it tapped the Cimarron.

As Curly expected, only fragments of last year's diversion dam was there. He knew that the ordinary rancher put in a new and cheap diversion dam each spring, good for one season only. As a rule, fall cloudbursts washed the dam away, but by then it had served its purpose for the season.

"This is easy," commented Curly, looking the intake site over. "All we gotta do is to chop down forty or fifty of them cedars up on the hill, throw 'em across the creek and weight 'em down with rocks; it won't take long to turn the whole crik into the ditch."

Fording the nice head of snow water now running down the stream bed, the two men climbed a slope which extended upward toward the north rimrock of the valley. Along the creek itself was no vegetation at this point, due to the dispoliation of lava deposits and huge boulders, but there were plenty of young cedars up on the slope.

Lee and Curly began cutting these trees. They left the boles, dragging only the branches down to the damsite. They threw this brush across the stream, just below the mouth of the U Bar ditch. The water continued to pass through the brush, wasting down stream.

AFTER the channel was piled bank to bank with cedar boughs, the men began throwing boulders on top of the evergreen mass to weight it down. Still the water continued to pass through, although its level above the boughs was raised several inches.

"Got to raise it a couple of feet before it'll flow into the ditch," appraised Curly. "But that's easy. Let's throw on another three or four ton of rock."

By night they had done this. But although the cedar core was completely buried with rocks, the whole was still porous, and the water still continued to escape. However it lacked only a few inches of being raised high enough to enter the ditch. There was no headgate to the ditch; the posts of an old gate were at the mouth, but obviously the gate itself had been washed away by some flood and never replaced.

"Let's go home," suggested Curly Smith. "In the morning I'll shunt the creek, all of it, into that ditch so fast it'll make your head swim."

"I don't see how that porous pile of brush and rock is ever going to turn the water," objected Lee, frowning at the escaping water, which in volume was perhaps ten cubic feet per second. From a pond above it gushed through the dam, then went racing in foamy riffles down the bouldered creek bed.

"Leave it to me," answered Curly. "You go and do whatever you want to in the morning. By noon you'll see me out there spading the Cimarron River, all of it, around the vega field."

ACCORDINGLY in the morning Lee left the job to Smith, Lee himself taking a ride up-valley to pay a call on

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Joe Sharpio. He was but following Brisbane's advice, cultivating Sharpio. If the Italian stood in with Quiggs, perhaps he would make a slip which would throw light in some hidden corner.

As he rode away from the U Bar, he looked back and saw Curly Smith industriously at work. Curly had arisen early and rounded up a U Bar hay team. This he had hitched to a rick, and was now engaged in getting a load from a stack of old, spoiled hay, near the upper end of the vega field. Lee understood the plan now. Curly would haul that rotten hay up to the dam and throw it in the water against the upper side of the brush and rock. The water would suck the hay into the cracks between boughs, where the straw would swell and effect the caulking of the dam. The creek above would thus rise another foot, at which stage it would pour into the U Bar ditch. Then Curly could go home, put up his team and start irrigating.

En route to Sharpio's house, Lee followed the main traveled road which hugged the south side of the valley. He had in mind a plausible excuse for his visit to the Italian. Last night Curly Smith had mentioned that the U Bar did not seem to possess a ditch drag, a V shaped implement used for the cleaning of tumble weeds out of laterals. Lee decided that he would ask the loan of one from Sharpio.

When he had entered the main gate of the Rafter Z and was approaching the house, he saw Sharpio himself out in front, whitewashing a picket yard fence and talking to a man on horseback. On the porch Lee could see the Italian's portly wife churning butter, and not far away in the yard he could see a large number of nut brown children at play. The entire scene seemed so peacefully domestic that Lee was inclined to decide there and then that Sharpio could only be what he claimed to be, a good friend and neighbor.

The man on horseback who was conversing with Joe turned out to be Pixlee, the Folsom liveryman. For an hour he had been trying unsuccessfully to trade Sharpio a dozen broomtail broncos for a pair of young mules. Lee's appearance interrupted the horse-trading negotiations. Joe dropped his brush and came rushing forward, his swarthy face beaming cordially.

"Ah, my good friend McAfee," he cried. "You knew Peexlee, Meester McAfee?" Pixlee and Lee exchanged salutes. "Come een," went on the cordial Italian, waving Lee toward the house, "and have cup of fine choke-cherry wine. You like the capulin wine? Ah, eet ees very fine. Come een."

PIXLEE had already tasted Sharpio's wine and needed no further invitation. Wiping lips in anticipation, he led the way to the house. Sharpio and McAfee followed, Joe with his arm about the U Bar man's shoulders and talking volubly. They passed the portly Mrs. Sharpio without introductions, and Lee later learned that the woman understood no English.

Passing through the house to an enclosed patio, Joe seated his guests and produced a skin of wild-cherry wine. It proved to possess an excellent flavor, with considerable kick. Lee drank it, for to have declined would have been to offend the host, which he did not want to do.

As he sipped the wine and listened to Joe's friendly chatter, and heard the innocent shoutings of children beyond the wall, he began to feel ashamed of his intrigue in making the visit. It hardly seemed possible that Sharpio could be anything but straight.

However he mentioned his lack of a ditch cleaner, and was about to ask for the loan of one when Joe forestalled him.

"Ah, you need a deetch cleaner, Meester McAfee? I eenseest you use mine. I shall send eet to your ranch immediately. No, no; eet ees no trouble. I am so delight to serve a good neighbor, Meester McAfee. *Oye, Chico; venga aqui.*"

Clapping his hands Sharpio called a Mexican house boy, refusing to listen to Lee's protestations that he would call for the ditcher himself. The boy came, and Sharpio instructed him to find the Rafter Z foreman immediately; the foreman was to personally and without delay load the

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ditcher on a wagon, and deliver it to the U Bar.

More than ever did Lee feel ashamed of himself. Now Sharpio poured out a new round of wine; under its stimulant the liveryman, Pixlee, felt inspired to better his offer for the young mules.

"I give you them broomtails and twenty-five dollars to boot," he now told Sharpio.

"Make eet feefty to boot and the mules are yours," offered the Italian, coming down a peg himself, for until now he had held out for seventy-five.

Pixlee said he would go down to the barn and take another look at the mules. Excusing himself, he left them. Sharpio poured Lee a third mug of wine, turning a deaf ear to Lee's protest that he had had enough. On this point however Lee stood pat with his refusal. He could not drink more than two cups in one day, he said. Whereupon nothing would do but that Sharpio must send down on the wagon which was to carry the ditcher to the U Bar three gallons of the wine, Joe insisting that he had more than he could use.

Not only that, but Sharpio it seemed had butchered a ewe yesterday and as the weather was turning warm was afraid it would spoil. So he must also send down to the U Bar, with the ditcher and the wine, the rear quarter of a grain-fed ewe.

"You are a thousand times too good, Sharpio," said Lee, and he meant it.

NOR was there any guile in his speech a little later, as he remarked, "Sharpio, I certainly appreciate having a good neighbor like you. Frankly, I don't like the general run of this Cimarron crowd. Most of them are a lot of wolves and I think they not only murdered my uncle but framed him for a rustler. I'm willing to gamble Quiggs is an open and shut crook. I tell you this as a friend, but I'd tell it to Quiggs himself if I saw him. I'm out after that fellow; I'm going to hang the deadwood on him, and on every wolf in his pack."

Lee made this speech with grim vindictiveness, not directed toward Sharpio, of whom all his suspicions were now lulled, but toward Sol Quiggs. He did not feel called upon to conceal his hostility toward Quiggs.

But at the reference to his uncle's fate, it

seemed to him that he surprised a furtive shadow, whether of fear or guilt, in the eyes of the Italian, followed by a narrowing of the lids, as though the man suddenly wished to close the windows of his soul.

Something in that swift change in Joe's expression, and a certain nervous moistening which he gave to his lips, again stirred the cold embers of Lee's earlier theory, that Joe was in with Quiggs. But he did not regret his speech. If the shoe fitted Sharpio, thought McAfee, let him wear it.

Just then Pixlee came in and agreed to Joe's last offer, fixing the boot on the horse trade at fifty dollars. Lee arose to depart, and Sharpio told Pixlee that he would ride to Folsom with him, helping drive the mules, returning later with his dozen broncos.

Lee remarked that he would ride directly down the creek bank to the U Bar, instead of using the main road, in order to see what kind of a job his man had done caulking the diversion dam. His departure was simultaneous with that of Joe and Pixlee, though in an opposite direction. The pair went up the creek, driving the mules, while Lee went down. As McAfee rode away, he saw the Rafter Z foreman loading a heavy ditch drag onto a wagon. Again his conscience hurt him that he had suspected Sharpio, who in every way was extending the right hand of friendship.

CHAPTER X

A FINE, ITALIAN LEFT

ARRIVING at the line fence between the Rafter Z and the U Bar, Lee found a gate on the creek bank. Through this he passed, continuing on down toward the new diversion dam, which would only be about two miles further, and one mile above his own hay meadow.

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He was in an area where the valley bed was strewn with volcanic droppings, and where there was no vegetation whatever along the channel of the Cimarron. The creek was littered with huge boulders, and in the cinder banks the floods of centuries had cut strange figures, cavities, stools, columns.

The water in the stream was a trifle higher than yesterday, he noted, no doubt due to the increasing warmness of the weather. It hardly seemed possible to Lee that Curly Smith, with a single load of old hay, had diverted this entire river into a ditch.

But arriving at the cedar bough dam, he found that such was the case. The stream was backed up into a pond some three feet deep at the dam, perhaps thirty feet wide and two hundred yards long. From this pond the Cimarron boiled into the U Bar ditch, flowing away along the valley's contour toward the McAfee vega. There was of course a slight leakage through the dam, perhaps ten per cent. of the entire head, which trickled off, wasting down the natural bed of the river.

"Curly sure knows his oats," Lee muttered, as he regarded the straw-caulked dam. "He's an A-One——"

Crack! Just then a rifle barked spitefully, somewhere up among the cedars on the north hill slope, near where the U Bar men had cut the boughs yesterday. A bullet passed through the peak of Lee's hat, sweeping it from his head.

His horse was standing on the dam. He jumped it down into the stream bed below, just as a second bullet spattered on the rocks of the dam itself. It flashed through Lee's mind that a would-be assassin was ambushed up there on the slope. The man had a rifle, while Lee had only a .38 six-shooter. It was folly to think of giving battle. The thing to do was to get on down the creek and home.

So Lee spurred the horse hard, forcing him into a plunging gait down the bouldered stream bed. More bullets whizzed by him. Crack! Crack! Crack! The man up there was pumping lead with business-like precision. Lee kept spurring on down the channel, looking for a place to get out upon the bank and seeing one not far ahead of him. Just then, with bullets flying all around, Lee's horse stumbled, going to his knees. McAfee was sure the animal was hit.

But the horse regained its feet and, thoroughly frightened itself now, went plunging on down the rocky channel, which here, just below the dam, now carried but about one-tenth of its normal flow.

The barking rifle up there on the slope appeared to be nearer now. Turning his head, McAfee saw that the killer had come out into the open, had come out of the cedars and was guiding his horse down the slope, decreasing the range. Lee had never seen the man before, nor the sorrel horse he rode, but he would have been willing to gamble that Quiggs was familiar with both. Another bullet whizzed by, so near that Lee could hear its voice and feel its breath. He whipped out his own gun and sent three slugs in reply.

OBVIOUSLY the attacker knew that he was out of short-arm range, for he kept coming on, blazing rifle to his cheek as his sorrel slid down the slope. Then, just as Lee was nearing the point where he had seen an egress from the creek bed, a bullet plowed a furrow down his scalp. Another stung the horse, making it rear. Lee, dizzy from the impact of the bullet and with a trickle of blood running out of his hair, lurched forward and slid from the saddle to the rocks. The horse went on, saw that egress to the right, and climbed from the channel. Lee himself lay prone in the shallow stream, the leak water from the dam running over his face.

It revived him a little, and he raised his head. A few yards down the stream he saw a cluster of great three-foot boulders and toward these he began rolling, to seek their shelter. He was a poorer target for the killer's bullets now, and these flew over him as he rolled that half dozen yards. At last he gained the cluster of boulders and crawled in among them.

To use them as shelter, he had to remain on his knees, squarely in the shallow riffles of the creek. But any port in a storm, he thought, as he drew the .38 from its hol-

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ster again and prepared to defend his position. His only consolation was that to get at him now, the killer must come within pistol range.

But this the man seemed loathe to do. Arriving at the creek bank, which he struck squarely at the north end of the U Bar diversion dam, the killer paused. He was still five hundred feet from Lee, a deadly rifle range but a reasonably ineffective range for pistol. From this position the attacker splattered a few more bullets around the tops of Lee's boulder clump, and then dismounted to prepare a more leisurely siege.

LEE took a few shots at him from over the rocks, and then waited to see what he would do. He was in a miserably inconvenient stance, kneeling in riffles about six inches deep, bitterly cold riffles, newborn from melting snows. But not nearly so inconvenient, thought Lee, as it would be to stand up and expose his head and torso to the rifleman.

He could see now that the man was a rat-faced Latin of some kind, either a Mexican or Italian, and that he wore a hat about three sizes too big for him. He appeared to be in no hurry whatever, as the victim was safely trapped. And now he pursued a commendable strategy. Lee's horse, having climbed the bank in fright, had run a hundred yards or so until it had stepped on a dragging rein. There it had stopped, a little way up on the north slope, toward the fringe of cedars. Rat-face saw it standing there, and led his own horse toward it. This he could do without decreasing the range between himself and McAfee.

Arriving at Lee's horse and catching its loose rein, the man led both horses to the nearest cedar, where he tied them to a limb. He then returned down to the diversion dam, afoot, to resume his attack on Lee's position.

He had Lee safely bottled, and had captured Lee's horse; so that if by any chance the victim did make a dash from the boulder clump he would have no chance to regain a mount.

The cedar bough dam made a good place for the killer to shoot over. From there for an hour he held Lee on his knees in the water, crouched in the boulder clump, five hundred feet below. McAfee's legs began to ache, and he felt that he could not endure the stance much longer. He wished that he had chosen another refuge, which he saw now on the south bank of the stream, and just above the normal water line. It was one of those strange flood-freaks cut in the soft cinder banks, a cavity not much bigger than a wolf den, and much resembling one; also it was fairly well shielded by some stooled columns in front. If he were there instead of here, thought Lee, he might hold out till dark; and he knew that darkness makes all guns equal.

BUT he dared not risk the dash of fifteen yards to this alternate shelter. The enemy, shooting over his bulwark, could easily pick him off during such an attempt.

Yet Lee's feet and knees were getting numb with cold. Whatever the risk, he must soon make a dash for the cinder cave. Covertly he watched the enemy, in order to pick the most opportune time for such a move.

Then he was aware that for some moments Rat-face had not fired the rifle; in fact, Lee saw that he had laid the rifle aside. He was busy with some other occupation, which puzzled Lee for a moment, until he saw at last that the killer was tampering with the dam. That was it. He had removed several of the rock weights at one point, and was tugging at a cedar bough.

In a flash Lee divined the scheme. A counter-scheme popped into his own head. He would——

But just then Rat-face looked up, saw him peering from the nest of boulders, snatched up the rifle and fired. The bullet splashed a stone chip into Lee's cheek, and he ducked to safety.

But now he forgot the cold snow water

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which had been numbing his knees, as he considered the enemy's strategy and planned his own. Obviously the man was going to remove a few cedar boughs, thus starting the water to spout over and through the dam. With this beginning, and a few handfuls of rotten hay pulled away, the entire stored pond would come through with a rush, the water seeking its own and original channel.

The rush of water would flood Lee out. For a few minutes the river would have not only its normal flow but the added head of the reservoir pent by the dam itself. In such a mill-race no man could remain on his knees. Then, whether Lee would or no, he must jump for the creek bank.

Obviously Rat-face was aware of this, as he tugged at the rock-weighted boughs. The thing decided Lee's problem for him. He must chance the dash for the alternate shelter, choosing the devil instead of the deep blue sea. Long before he reached the cave, it would be hailing bullets, of course, but nevertheless the try must be made.

Already he could feel the water deeper and more violent around his knees, and knew that what demolition Rat-face had already accomplished was showing results. Also he knew a certain characteristic of dams, a thing common to the best and worst of them. When they begin to fail, complete failure follows swiftly. Make but a single small rupture and the water itself will attend to the enlargement of it.

This law of nature began to operate now; what had previously been only the whispering murmur of a leak, now became a hum, then a roar. Swiftly the water arose around the knees of McAfee. He peered from his shelter again, only for an instant, then dodged back before Rat-face could see his spying and fire. But he had observed the man tugging with both hands at a large and obstinate cedar bough.

Lee's counter strategy was to run, not when he was flooded out, but before. In fact, right now was the time for the dash, while both the man's hands were occupied in a pull.

SO McAFEE sheathed his .38, crouched for a spring, then leaped forth and away toward the bank.

His success exceeded his best hope. Rat-face, engaged at tugging on the key bough of his breach, did not see Lee until he was in mid dash. Just then the bough came

loose from its moorings; the released tension upset Rat-face, spilling him in a tumble into the three-foot reservoir behind the dam. Scrambling to his feet, thigh deep in water and at the very spillway of the breach, he leaned forward and snatched at his rifle which was lying on the dam. But as he whipped it to his shoulder, the current, sucking at his legs, disturbed his aim sufficiently to cause his first bullet to fly wide of McAfee. By the time he had steadied himself for a second trigger pull Lee was hidden in the water-cut cave, and further shielded by several stool-shaped rocks in front.

Down its natural bed the Cimarron rushed in full head. But too late to serve Rat-face or menace McAfee. The killer, seeing his malicious labor lost, could do nothing but curse the outcome and wade to the bank. There he chose a sheltering rock and settled down to the renewal of his siege.

After all the victim was still trapped. And while the dark of a night would soon come, and make all guns equal, this did not disturb Rat-face. He was a creature of the dark himself, and therein was accustomed to attain his best results.

But suddenly the situation was disarranged for Rat-face. From down the U Bar ditch came a shout. From his sheltering cave, Lee heard it, and it brought an exultation to his heart. Rat-face heard it, and his head swung toward it, his rifle turning with a jerk to cover a new target.

"Here you, there on the dam," shouted the voice down-ditch. "What the heck you done with my water? You the bird dried up my ditch?"

Crack! crack! Put! put! Lee heard fir-

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ing from two quarters, knew that Rat-face was shooting at Curly Smith, and that Curly was shooting back. McAfee jumped from his shelter and joined in the fight. Smith, he knew, had come up the ditch to see why it had suddenly gone dry. Rat-face's own maneuver had called Smith to the scene.

THE killer was shooting down-ditch, at Curly. Lee walked straight at him, blazing away with his .38 and decreasing the range at every step. Rat-face, between two fires, began a retreat. In a moment his retreat became a rout. Turning about, he began scrambling up the north slope, toward the two tethered horses.

Curly Smith, like McAfee, had only a six-gun. Thus, though both he and Lee kept throwing lead after the man, they failed to hit him at the range; but one of the nearly spent bullets appeared to hit the man's sorrel horse, a second or two before Rat-face reached it. For the sorrel plunged, the jerk breaking the rein; freed, the horse raced up a few rods higher into the cedars.

Rat-face took no time to pursue his horse. Here was another at hand, Lee McAfee's. So snatching the reins of Lee's horse he leaped to the animal's back, dug in with his spurs and was off, disappearing into the cedars upward toward the rim-rock.

Curly was mounted. Lee instructed him not to pursue the killer, but merely to ride up and capture the loose sorrel. This Smith did without trouble, bringing the animal down to the damsite. The first thing Lee did was to examine the sorrel's brand. It was Rafter Z, the brand of Joe Sharpio.

Lacking another mount, Lee rode the sorrel back to the U Bar. There he found a farm wagon drawn up before the house, and on the seat was an individual who introduced himself as Sharpio's foreman. He was the bearer of a loan, and gifts; for in the wagon bed were a ditcher, a demijohn of wine, a quarter of ewe and, last afterthought of the generous Sharpio, a large and fragrant Italian cheese.

"Take 'em back," said McAfee. "Tell your boss I've decided to buy my groceries at the store. Hitch this sorrel to the end gate and take it along, too. Rat-face will explain all about it when he gets home to supper. That's all. As you pass out, close the gate behind you."

Chapter XI

THE CAT CANYON DANCE

FRIDAY night came and Curly Smith donned his best raiment, which consisted of the suit he had worn en route from Kenton, carefully placed a six-gun in his rear trousers' pocket, hitched a slow horse between the shafts of the U Bar buggy and set forth to take Betty Summers to the Cat Canyon dance.

He was mildly expectant that the affair might produce more action than that inspired by the fiddles. There was even a chance of a little action at the SQ, where he was to call for Miss Summers. A man by the name of Bill, or Duke, Ballard, so he understood, was foreman of the Quiggs ranch and this fellow had been formerly accustomed to squiring the young lady himself.

Curly had talked to Betty yesterday across the line fence, and she had begged him to let her meet him at the main road gate. But Curly had been pained at the very mention of such discourtesy. When he took a girl to a frolic, declared the cowboy, he went all the way to the front door and he'd like to see anyone stop him.

He was almost disappointed when, driving his one-horse outfit up in front of the Quiggs house, nothing at all out of the way happened. Betty admitted him, informing him that the rest of the SQ crowd had already gone to the dance, family, cowboys and cook. But she whispered in his ear that she had, following the direction of Adam Brisbane, unearthed something of importance along the line of evidence against Sol Quiggs. She would relate it in detail as soon as they were away from the house.

ACCORDINGLY, Curly and the girl were soon in the buggy and driving across the meadow toward the main road gate.

"What is this warm stuff you got hung

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on Quiggs, Miss Betty?" was Smith's first and natural question.

"Oh, Curly, I've been scared pink," answered the girl. "For I have stumbled on something important. It's burning a hole in my pocket right now, and I can't wait to get rid of it. I have had it hidden since last night; Mr. Quiggs and Bill Ballard have been ransacking the house all day to recover it."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Curly. "What is it, anyway? A signed confession?"

"Something almost as convincing, Curly. I saw Bill Ballard tear it in half last night and throw it in the ash can by the kitchen door. It was just after supper, and I happened to be in the kitchen, helping with the dishes. I took some cinders from the stove and pretended to go out and throw them away. There on the ashes I saw the pieces of what Ballard had torn in two; I picked them up and stuffed them in my apron pocket. Then I threw the cinders in the can and went back into the kitchen."

"Aw, I know what it was," exclaimed Curly. "A piece of bloody rope."

"I didn't know whether it was important or not," went on the girl, ignoring the crude suggestion, "until a few minutes later when I saw Sol Quiggs and Bill Ballard coming back across the patio from the front porch. 'You'd ought not have done that,' I heard Quiggs say to Bill. The two went straight to the ash can, removed the lid and saw the hot, fresh cinders on top.

" 'Someone's been here since I was,' I heard Bill say. Then the two raked out the dozen or so fresh cinders and began looking on top of the old cold ashes for the torn pieces Bill had thrown in. Of course they didn't find them, for they were in my pocket. I had no time to put the pieces together and see what they made, but from the way Quiggs and Ballard took the loss I could see I had stumbled on to something. Thinking they might come in and quiz everybody in the kitchen—there was Mrs. Quiggs and a Mexican girl besides me—I stepped up against the flour barrel and jammed the torn pieces down wrist deep into the flour. Then I smoothed the flour over, covering up the hole.

"Now I know what it was," insisted Curly Smith excitedly. In all the Oklahoma panhandle there had been no closer student of detective serials than Smith. "I know what it was," he repeated. "It was the blotter with which someone had blotted the signed confession, and when you hold this blotter up to the looking-glass——"

"Hush, Curly," commanded Betty Summers "let me get this told before——"

"Yes," broke in the cowboy eagerly, "before they clap a chloroformed towel over your head and silence you forever. Hurry up; I'm listening."

"Before we get to the schoolhouse, I mean," finished Betty, "where Quiggs and all his friends will be and where they mustn't see us whispering. As I was about to say, sure enough Quiggs and Ballard came into the kitchen, wanting to know who had just carried some cinders out a few minutes before. Mrs. Quiggs had seen me take them out, so I said I had. Quiggs asked, 'Did you see some pieces of paper in the can?' "

"And you said no, naturally," suggested Smith.

"On the contrary, I said yes," answered the girl. "If I had said no, they would have known it was not true, for the papers were gone and I was the only one who had been to the can. So I said that something blew off from the top of the can as I carried it out, and maybe that was what they wanted. I said I hadn't noticed particularly. This seemed to satisfy Bill Ballard, who went out and began looking around on the leeward side of the patio. But Quiggs was suspicious. 'Sure it didn't blow into your pocket?' he asked, coming toward me with the intent of investigating that possibility written plainly on his face. I told him I certainly had no papers and reminded him that there were a hundred men in the Cimarron Valley who would be glad to shoot him dead if he touched me."

"And I'm one of 'em," broke in Curly

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Smith loyally. "Why, the ornery skunk! He——"

"That stopped him," continued Betty. "He was just about to go out and join Ballard in searching the yard when Mrs. Quiggs, simple soul that she is, exclaimed, 'Why, Betty, how did you get all that flour on your arm?' Sure enough, my right hand and wrist were white with flour, where I had jammed them into the barrel. Quiggs saw it himself, and I thought I was gone."

"Gosh!" cried Curly, squirming nervously in the buggy seat. "How did you explain that?"

"I didn't try to explain it," she replied. The horse had arrived at the road gate and stopped of its own accord. Betty took the reins and told Curly to get out and removed the bars. While he was doing so she went on, "I just looked at my white hand and wrist and murmured, 'Why, I *am* all smeared up,' then went over to the basin and began washing my hands. Sol's eyes followed me suspiciously; then he approached the flour barrel and delved around in it with his hand. It was all I could do to keep my back toward him, and I wanted to scream. But as luck would have it, his fingers did not happen to encounter those two scraps of paper."

By now Betty had driven the buggy through the gate; Curly, replacing the bars, resumed his seat.

"So you got away with them?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, here they are," assented Betty. She handed two semi-circular discs to Smith, taking the reins again while he examined them.

CURLY put the two halves together and, although the light was poor, he immediately recognized the ensemble. "Why," he said, in a tone of considerable disappointment, "this is just another print of that same snapshot Adam Brisbane showed us. It's a duplicate of the picture which shows Jud McAfee branding a calf, Jud's horse and the calf's muley mother standing by."

"You miss something, Curly," countered Betty. "It is just because Bill Ballard did show that picture around town and advance it as evidence against Judson McAfee, that *this* picture becomes important. This isn't a print from the same film at all. It was snapped from the same pose, but you would notice, if you had better light, that here the brander's back is not squarely to the camera; a little of his jaw shows. Just enough to make it plain, if you had known Jud McAfee, that this is *not* he. The poser is an impostor, who used Jud's horse to defame Jud. This second print clears Judson, pins a conspiracy on the man in the picture and on those who took it."

"Whewee!" cried Curly Smith. "You sure swung a mean loop this time, Miss Betty. Brisbane'll be at the school house, and I'll turn the evidence over to him. He'll know how to use it. But you'll sure have to get yourself a new boarding house, Betty, because Brisbane'll run Quiggs clear out of Nueva Mex."

"That takes care of itself," answered Betty. "Today was the last day of school, and tomorrow dad is driving up to take me and my things home."

LIGHTS ahead, and the sounds of many hilarious voices, indicated that they were approaching the Cat Canyon School. Curly put the two halves of the photograph in the inside pocket of his coat. As he did so, his fingers touched something

which already occupied the pocket. This was his best coat, the one he had worn on his ride from Kenton to Folsom and which he had not till tonight resumed after his arrival at the U Bar. Thus the inside pocket still retained a small, flat, two-ounce bottle filled with crystals of strychnine, handed him last by the clerk in the Folsom drug store. It occurred to Curly that this was a strange accoutrement for a man to carry at a dance, but after all it was of small bulk and presented no inconvenience.

Arriving at the school he helped Betty

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to the ground, then hitched the horse to a rack. A few minutes later they were dancing on a packed floor. Nearly every family on the upper Cimarron was represented, with a sprinkling from down on the Carrumpaw. A few of the revelers had come all the way from the Chuquaak, up in Colorado. But looking around as he guided Betty through the mob, Curly saw nothing of Adam Brisbane.

When the dance was over Duke Ballard came up and claimed Miss Summers, leading her over to form the fourth and last couple of a quadrille set being organized by Joe Sharpio, the merriest merrymaker in the crowd. Curly withdrew; then, seeing Pixlee, the Folsom liveryman, lounging near the door, he went over to inquire of Pixlee why Brisbane had not come to the dance.

"Ad'll be here," informed the liveryman. "He come as far as the U Bar gate with us town boys; he turned in there to have a confab with that young McAfee feller. Seemed like he knowed McAfee wasn't comin' to the dance. But he won't stay there long. Ad never missed a hoe-down in his life."

However, a number of sets had been finished before Brisbane appeared. During this interval, Curly was content not to dance himself, preferring to stand back to the wall with his eyes open. He was alert to resent any discourtesy which might have been offered Miss Summers, but he saw nothing to which he could take exception. He saw Quiggs eyeing him once, and nudging a man later identified to Curly as Jardine of the Fishtail. But no one offered to molest him, the dance proceeding in an orderly manner.

IN FACT Jim Pixlee, who was master of ceremonies, had declared a strict floor rule against liquor, which helped to make for good deportment. Two present had been drinking a little—Curly heard them referred to as Ike Somebody and Frank Slidell—but after a while Pixlee called these two aside and whispered some warning in their ears. Curly saw them retire out into the night.

Two or three lower valley girls whom Curly had met while working on the Summers place gave him reasonably inviting glances, but the Kenton cowboy stood firm in his decision not to dance until he had turned that evidence in his pocket over to Brisbane. He had a pretty good idea that his inside breast pocket would immediately become a magnet for bullets, if by any chance Quiggs, Ballard and their friends learned the character of its content. So he kept his back to the wall.

At last Brisbane arrived. Curly allowed him to dance one set; then not too conspicuously called him outside. First he led the lawyer to the hitch rack, but there they found a group of Folsom boys swapping gossip. Desiring absolute privacy, Curly took the lawyer then around to the rear, coming to stop at last in the shadow of a huge cottonwood near the school wood shed.

There Smith retold Betty's story and handed over the two halves of the picture. Brisbane held the segments together while Curly struck a match. Then the lawyer compared the result with another picture he had in his pocket. He whistled.

"It's a clincher," was Adam's verdict. "It hangs the deadwood on Quiggs, Ballard and the man in the picture. And if it don't convict the rest of the gang, it'll scare 'em so bad they'll leave the country. Strike another match, Curly, and see if I can't recognize that poser's jaw."

CURLY complied, and in the flare of light Adam stared intently at the kneeling brander. As Betty had noticed, his back was not as squarely toward the camera as it had been intended, so that his cheek and jowl were shown in quarter profile.

"It's Chip Chimino," Adam decided at last. "He's a wop gunman who works for Sharpio, another link in the tie which binds Sharpio to Quiggs. This Chimino, by the way, from the description Lee McAfee gave me of him tonight, is the sharpshooter who tried to pot McAfee at the dam. We've got the goods now on practically every principal except Pink Jardine."

"What next?" queried Smith.

"The next thing," replied a voice which

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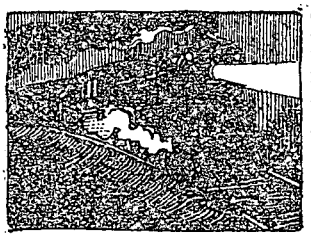
was not Adam's, but which came from the woodshed door, "will be to reach for the sky." Frank Slidell of the SQ was the speaker. He held a .45 in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other.

"Yep," echoed the man Ike, who, banished by Pixlee from the dance floor, had retired with Slidell to the woodshed. "Yep; fork over that picture and 'en reach fer the sky."

STARTLED, Brisbane and Smith raised their arms, facing the SQ men. The lawyer still retained the evidence in his raised hand. Now, as Ike came forward to take it from him, Adam saw by the gait of Ike and by his bloodshot eyes that Ike was drunk, very drunk. He, too, held an almost empty quart in his left hand, as did Slidell. Thinking quickly, the lawyer decided that he and Curly ought to be able to handle them, even though the SQ men had the drop. He kicked Curly in the shin, whispering, "Take Slide."

Just then Ike weaved up and snatched for the photographs. He had to stand on tiptoe to do so, his eyes upward on the objects of his snatch. Up came Brisbane's knee into Ike's groin, and down came his long, lean-fingered hands to Ike's throat. At the same minute Curly Smith sailed through the air at Slidell, surprising him, knocking him back into the shed before the half-drunken cowboy could pull a trigger. Like a cat Curly was on him, cracking him between the eyes with a right, slamming a left to his belly; Slidell hit the ground here and his gun flew there. Curly picked up a stick of stovewood and knocked him senseless. At the same time something else hit the floor of the shed. It was the gasping form of Ike, hurled in by Brisbane. Both Ike and Slidell lay as they had fallen, dead to the world. Curly and Adam stepped out, shut the woodshed door, closed the hasp over the staple and inserted the peg, locking their assailants within.

"Now," resumed the lawyer briskly, "you asked what next. The next thing is for you and me and Miss Summers to get to Folsom and catch the night passenger for Clayton. We three alone know of this evidence, and not a one of our lives would be worth a candle if Quiggs finds it out. Thing to do is to get away with it, tell our story to the district attorney at the county seat and put the evidence in his safe. We can come back with a posse and warrants for Quiggs, Ballard, Sharpio and Chip Chimino. Very likely one of them will turn state's evidence and embroil the rest of the gang, incidentally revealing the nature of the frameup against Jud McAfee. We've got to get started right away. You run in and get Betty. Just whisper in her



ear that it's a life and death matter for us to catch number two at Folsom, due there now in one hour. We'll stop by the U Bar and pick McAfee; then the four of us'll go to Clayton."

SO PLANNED Adam Brisbane. His plan was discreet and well conceived. For to have accused Quiggs there and then would have started a free for all fight, breaking the dance up in a holocaust of flame and smoke. Especial targets of the gang would be the three who alone had seen the torn photograph, and if these three were killed in the mêlée, the whole case would collapse.

Therefore Betty Summers was plucked from the dance by her escort while the evening was yet young. Outside she was bundled into the buggy and told by Adam Brisbane that they were going to the county-seat. She had heard Curly's whispered warning, and did not protest.

Smith climbed to the seat beside her, and slapped the reins. Off they went toward Folsom, the tall, ungainly figure of Brisbane riding at the wheel.

THEY had not gone a mile before a council of six men was held under the cottonwood, in the rear of the Cat Canyon school and near its woodshed. These six were Sol Quiggs, Pink Jardine, Joe Sharpio, Duke Ballard, Chip Chimino and the SQ cowboy Ike. Inside the shed Frank Slidell still lay dead to the world, but Ike had come to, pried a loose board

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from the back of the shed and run to Quiggs.

"The hell you say!" Quiggs was exclaiming. "You sure you ain't had one drink too many, Ike?"

"You betcha I'm tellin' the trut'," insisted Ike, caressing the bruised spot on his windpipe made by the thumbs of Adam Brisbane. "Slide and I was in the shed, havin' a little drink, seein' as how Pixlee wouldn't allow no liquor on the floor, when we hear these two geezers talkin'. One was spillin' a song and dance about a girl findin' a picture in a ash can, and——"

"Goshomighty!" cried Pink Jardine. "We gotta stop 'em."

"You're whistling we gotta stop 'em," snorted Quiggs, whirling to Duke Ballard. "Duke," he ordered, "it's up to you and Pink. I got to stay here because I got a wife on my hands, and Joe's in the same fix. You and Pink and Chip and Puny and Ike and Slidell, if we can bring him to, and anybody else you can round up, ride like hell and head off Brisbane and his crowd. Stop 'em, understand? Stop 'em. Then hide 'em where nobody can hear 'em yip, till I figger what to do with 'em. Now git gone."

Thirty minutes later, just as they reached the U Bar gate and Curly had dismounted to open it, and just as a dark cloud had moved, like an evil omen, to obscure the moon, Brisbane, Smith and Betty Summers were set upon by vastly superior numbers. The attackers, a full dozen of them, stepped out of the inky darkness of the night and clubbed the two escorts before they could get into action. All three of the Brisbane party were bound, gagged and blindfolded, carried away ahorse like so much pirate loot, they knew not in what direction.

Chapter XII

A Mystery

WHEN Lee McAfee awoke Saturday morning at the U Bar, he went into the next room to wake up Curly Smith. He had not heard Curly come in but assumed he had done so, probably in the small hours of the morning, and would be naturally inclined to sleep late.

To Lee's surprise Smith was not there at all, nor had the bunk been disturbed. McAfee was puzzled and not a little alarmed. Why had Curly not returned from the dance?

After breakfasting in solitude, Lee went about the chores of the ranch. As he did so, a possible solution popped into his mind. Yesterday, the last Friday of April, had been the end of the school term, he knew. Therefore Betty Summers would no longer have need to board with the Quiggs. Naturally she would wish to return to her father's house, thirty miles down the valley. While this would be a long drive for Curly to have taken her after the dance in a one-horse buggy, still it was not impossible; and some strained relation between the girl and the Quiggs, arising from her having acted as a spy there for Brisbane, might have made her return intolerable. This might have caused her to request Curly to take her to her father's roof. Or if that were too far, then perhaps to some friendly nearer neighbor; and at this place Curly himself might have passed the remainder of the night, returning to the SQ in the morning to get Betty's trunk.

Consoling himself with this theory, Lee McAfee occupied the forenoon by going up to the U Bar diversion dam, replacing there those cedar boughs and rocks torn away by Rat-face. Concluding this reparation he returned to the house. There he was hailed by a visitor whom he recognized as the Folsom liveryman, Pixlee.

"Did Ad Brisbane stay all night here?" asked Pixlee.

"No," answered Lee. "Why?"

"Wonder what become of him then," returned Pixlee. "Doggone him, he hired my best ridin' mare for that dance, and ain't come back with it yet. He was at the dance all right, 'cause I seen him, but he left early. On the way there he rid as far as your gate with us Folsom boys, and then turned in to see you on what he called pressin' business. That made me think he might have stopped in on the way home, to stay all night."

"You guessed wrong," replied Lee.

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"And you say he hasn't showed up in Folsom?" McAfee was fully aroused now, and began to smell foul play. Both Smith and Brisbane were missing. Lee recalled that the latter had stopped by and talked with him a half an hour on the way to Cat Canyon, during which conference Lee had recounted his visit to Sharpio and the affair at the dam. After that Adam, desirous of getting a report from Betty Summers, had ridden on to the dance.

EXCHANGING information now with Pixlee, he learned that Brisbane had ridden away from the school house in a westerly direction, at the wheel of a buggy containing Smith and Miss Summers. That spoiled Lee's theory about Betty's return to her father's house. And if Smith and Brisbane were missing, why might not the girl be missing also?

Much concerned at this possibility, McAfee and Pixlee were soon riding toward the SQ. Lee had been warned to keep away from there, but he was bound at all costs to find out whether Betty Summers had returned safely from the dance.

As it turned out, the two men were saved the errand. Half way down the main road to the SQ, they encountered an excited ranchman driving a buckboard and lashing a rangy team to a gallop. He pulled up so shortly beside McAfee and Pixlee that he almost upset the rig.

"Hey, young feller," he bawled, addressing McAfee "I'm lookin' fer you. Maybe you can explain what become of my daughter. Sol Quiggs tells me she was last seen ridin' up your way with a U Bar puncher in a U Bar rig. Maybe you can explain——"

"Keep your shirt on, Summers," interrupted Lee, flushing a dark red at the sight of this man, against whom he cherished a resentment which was real. Here was the only man in the valley whose presence at Judson's execution he could actually prove.

"If there's any explainin' to be done between you and me," went on Lee, "do it yourself. You might start in by explainin' how this tobacco bag—" Lee held up the old bag he had once loaned Summers—"come to be lyin' under the tree where my uncle was lynched." He saw Summers' eyes open wide as he stared at the bag. "But let that pass," continued Lee, "until we get this other deal ironed out. Did Sol Quiggs mention the name of the U Bar puncher, which he insinuates kidnapped your daughter?"

"No," admitted Summers.

"All right; he was Curly Smith. Know him?"

"Curly Smith? Why, yes; he lived at my place two years." At Lee's mention of Betty's escort he could see that a great relief overspread Summers' face.

"You'd trust this Smith, wouldn't you?" asked Lee.

"Sure, I'd trust Curly Smith," affirmed the ranchman. "However, it's funny she ain't at Quiggs'. She knew I was drivin' up this mornin' to take her home."

Here Pixlee entered the discussion, informing Summers that not only his daughter was missing, but also Curly Smith and Adam Brisbane. Pixlee had seen the three leave the dance together, early, heading west. Scratching his head and growing serious, the liveryman now recalled that shortly afterward a number of other revelers had also suddenly lost interest in the dance, disappearing not to return.

Andy Summers, too much concerned about his daughter to reply to Lee's reference to the tobacco bag, pounced upon this clue. "Who were these gents that left right after our folks did?" he demanded.

AFTER prodding his memory, Pixlee answered, "Maybe a dozen of 'em in all, includin' Duke Ballard, Ike Peters, Puny Gotch, Frank Slidell, Pink Jardine and Tony Moreno."

"Helluva tough bunch!" exclaimed Andy. "First four you named are SQ's, the fifth is owner of the Fishtail and Moreno rides for the Rafter Z. Those three outfits always did herd together. I never have trusted 'em since they stretched Jud McAfee's neck. They——"

"Hold on," cut in Lee. "You don't trust yourself very much, either, do you? You were at that party yourself, Summers."

"I got there after it was all over," explained Summers. "Duke Ballard come ridin' down the valley roundin' up all the stockmen, calling them for a creek bank

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trial of Jud McAfee. Ballard claimed they'd caught Jud the third time. Naturally I was interested, having lost plenty of calves lately, but the main reason I and two-three neighbors of mine come along with Duke was to stop a lynchin'. We favored takin' Jud into the courts. But we got there five minutes too late. The SQ, Fishtail and Rafter Z crowd had already hanged Jud and his men, claiming a complete confession of each and all of them, and so what was the use of havin' a trial, asks Sol Quiggs. We down-valley men raised a row but it was too late. Quiggs said if we squealed he could prove we was in the mob, which we was, after a manner of speakin'. In the end, everyone bein' sure Jud was guilty and thus deservin' his fate, we agreed to keep our mouths shut. But I ain't goin' to keep it shut any more. McAfee, if Quiggs and company have kidnapped Betty, Curly and Ad Brisbane, it very likely has a bearing on the frame-up against your uncle, so we have a common cause. Let's get busy and search all three of those ranch layouts."

Mingled emotions of relief and bitterness had assailed Lee during Summers' explanation of his presence at the ford. Relief, because there was no longer any barrier between himself and Betty Summers. Bitterness because it made him see more clearly than ever that his uncle had been the victim of a frame-up. They had railroaded Jud to a limb, sending Duke down-valley to round up the honest ranchers and thus implicate them, then hanging Jud before he could speak up in his own defense. Anyway it made the whole case blacker against the three suspected ranches, entwined them more closely in the same net of scandal.

RIGHT you are," Pixlee was replying to Summers. "But to search them outfits we got to have a right smart gang with us. If one of them ranches has got Betty stowed away, they'd never let no three men enter the house. Le's ride to Folsom, pick up every man in town who can pull a trigger, then come down the creek, searchin' the Fishtail, the Rafter Z and the SQ as we come to 'em."

It was a good suggestion. Hot as both Summers and Lee were to be about the searching, they knew they must have help. So the three of them made all speed toward Folsom, covering the seven miles in forty minutes.

There they immediately commandeered the services of every male resident who could sit a horse or pull a trigger, a thing easy to accomplish because of Betty Summers' extreme popularity. Also a group of Carrumpaw cowboys happened to be in town, and these also were glad to join the posse. Adding to this crowd a ranchman from up near Trinchere Pass and his two tall mountaineer sons, who were in for supplies and who were great cronies of Brisbane, the total searching party at last numbered thirty-seven.

When they rode out of Folsom town there was hardly a Colt or Winchester left in it. It would have been a foolhardy rancher indeed who would have opposed their request for a search.

They were late in getting started, and it was four in the afternoon when they arrived at the first place down the creek, Jardine's Fishtail. Pink himself seemed to be the only one at home.

"Help yourself, gents," invited the shifty-eyed rancher, at Summers' demand that the premises be searched. But Lee McAfee noted that the Fishtail owner evaded the steady gaze of Andy. Pink was obviously nervous, although he vehemently denied having seen anything of Betty Summers, Curly Smith or Adam Brisbane.

The house of Jardine was ramshackle, unpainted, half shorn of shingles, in every way as unkempt as the bachelor ranchman himself. Without more ado the posse swarmed through it. Every room was searched, and then the environs and outbuildings were combed for clues of the missing trio. Not even such places as the potato cellar, implement shed or grain crib were overlooked. But no trace was found of prisoners.

The sharpest suspicions held by the

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possemen were directed at Sol Quiggs. It was at the Quiggs house that Betty had been boarding and where, Lee now informed them, she had been acting as a spy. It was Quiggs also who had been the main enemy and accuser of Jud McAfee, Quiggs who had the largest and toughest outfit of cowboy gunmen, an outfit headed by Duke Ballard, himself a recently disappointed suitor of Betty Summers.

"Let's get down to the Quiggs place before he hears we're comin'," more than one searcher suggested impatiently.

THUS the crowd were soon on their way down-valley, anxious to arrive at the SQ before dark. On the way they stopped at Sharpio's Rafter Z, there as at the Jardine place ransacking the main house and all outbuildings without result. The swarthy Italian appeared to be as shocked as any of them over the mishap to his two fine friends, as he called Betty and Brisbane. He did not know Smith. All the while the posse were searching his place, he stood by urging them to overlook no possible nook or cranny, himself pointing out out-of-the-way corners which might have been missed, alternately cursing in three languages the kidnappers of his good friends, insisting that he himself would bring these crooks to earth.

Not only that, but when they left to visit the SQ, Joe was with them, armed to the teeth. In addition to revolvers, rifle and shotgun he carried a twelve inch stiletto in his belt. When they drew up in front of Quiggs' door, he was the hardest-boiled posseman of them all.

But again at the SQ search was futile. Lee noticed that Duke Ballard was not around; on being asked where the foreman was Quiggs answered profanely that he didn't know.

In an hour or so the search party left, much discouraged. There was no use looking for tracks in the main road, to see which ranch gate the U Bar buggy might have turned into. In the first place, as one of the Carrumpaw cowboys reminded, the kidnappers had probably discarded the buggy. In the second place, last night there had been too many wheels and hoofs going to and from the Cat Canyon dance for any single set of them to have left a decent trail.

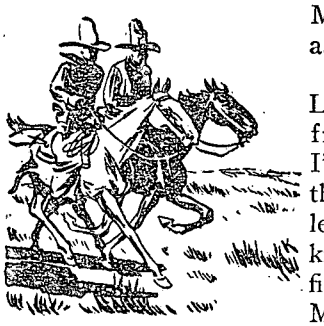
In the end the posse scattered up and down the valley, to enquire at every house, to explore each side canyon, agreeing on a rendezvous at the U Bar gate at nine the next morning

TRUTH was that one of the party had already noted, at the first of the three ranches searched, what appealed to him as he thought it over later as a possible clue. It was Lee McAfee who had noticed at the Fishtail something over and above the shifty, watery evasiveness of Pink Jardine's eyes. But it was such a miserably intangible detail that he was sure the others would scoff if he mentioned it.

Yet he could not throw it from his mind; being paired with Jim Pixlee during the night search, he at last mentioned it to the liveryman. And Pixlee did scoff at it. Why, that was nothing, he commented. Such a thing might have been seen in any ranch yard in New Mexico.

But as the night aged and Pixlee rode with McAfee up one side canyon and down another, finding nothing, calling without luck at every shack and sheep camp in their allotted area, the feeble clue advanced by McAfee began to take a stubborn hold on Pixlee himself. It kept recurring again and again to his mind.

"Did it look like it had been dead long, McAfee?" he asked at last.



"No," replied Lee; "it was fresh. In fact, I'd almost swear that one of its legs was still kicking when I first saw it. Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. Anyway I just thought——"

"Hell!" exclaimed Pixlee. "Let's you and me ride up to the Fishtail, soon's it comes daylight, and take another look."

Executing this suggestion, the two men crept up, at the first crack of dawn, to a position of vantage behind the Jardine grain crib. The object was to spy further

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into this detail observed yesterday by McAfee, a dead magpie which he had seen lying in the Fishtail yard. At the time he had thought but little of it, for like everyone else he had been hot to go to the SQ. It was later that it had occurred to him, although he could not be positive, that one of the bird's legs had given a last expiring kick as he looked at it. After the one kick it had lain quite still. As Lee had mulled the detail over, through the long and impotent night's search, he became more and more intrigued by it. Like a strange magnet that feathered lump drew him back to the house of Pink Jardine.

Chapter XIII

THE SOLUTION—IN BLACK AND WHITE

THE capture of Brisbane, Smith and Betty Summers had been forced so suddenly upon the captors that they had been at a loss to know just what disposition to make of the prisoners. There at the school house there had been no time to plan anything except the immediate interception of three dangerous witnesses.

Neither Quiggs nor Joe Sharpio had been personally present at the instant of capture, there on the dark road near the U Bar gate. Duke Ballard had represented Quiggs, and had shared command of the kidnappers with Pink Jardine.

Once the captives were bound, gagged and blinded, a sharp dispute arose as to just what to do with them. A minority advised the immediate killing of Smith and Brisbane. As for the girl, Ballard insisted on taking care of her himself. He was aiming to pull for Arizona and would take the girl with him.

Actually it was Pink Jardine who saved the lives of Smith and Brisbane. Pink was a crook, true enough, in deep on the machinations of Quiggs, but whether because of a weak moral streak in him, or whether from stark fear of consequence, he refused to countenance the immediate executions of Curly Smith and Adam Brisbane. At least he would not let it occur while he himself was in command of the party.

"Take 'em to the SQ and lock 'em up," suggested Pink, licking his loose, flabby lips. "When Sol comes home he can decide what to do with 'em." Pink planned to stay in town a few days, preparing a personal alibi in case Quiggs murdered the prisoners.

Ballard and Frank Slidell of the SQ refused to act on the suggestion. There was a Mrs. Quiggs, who did not know anything about her husband's range affairs, and it would never do to take the prisoners there. Also, naturally this would be the first place where Andy Summers would look for his daughter, and was therefore not to be considered. The wife and family argument also applied to the Rafter Z, as Tony Moreno and Chip Chimino pointed out. Sharpio had given them oft repeated instructions that no blood should stain the environs of his own ranch. That put it up to Jardine, who was the only bachelor in the triple alliance of ranchmen.

So after some bickering they took the prisoners to the Fishtail, stowing them into a false attic under the gable of Pink's ramshackle house. There was no stair to this attic, nor floor to it when one got there; it was merely the prism of air space between the ceiling and the roof. In the ceiling of Pink's main room was a square board-covered trap, whereby one might awkwardly ascend to the false attic by climbing a step ladder and by clambering from its top through the square, thus arriving in the dark, cobwebbed prism under roof. At least it was dark when Brisbane's party were shunted up, like so many bundles, into it. And it still was fairly dark at dawn, although a checkered light did then begin to creep in through the various holes and cracks caused by missing or askew shingles above.

INTO this area, then, were thrust the prisoners, two men and a girl. They were still bound, but now Duke Ballard, who appointed himself their personal jailer, removed their gags and blinds. They lay helpless across the two by eight joists, the rose dance dress of Betty Summers dimly contrasting with the black shapes of the gloom.

All the captors except Pink and Ballard scattered, Jardine's own two cowboys being sent on a distant range errand, the SQ crowd going to the Quiggs ranch while

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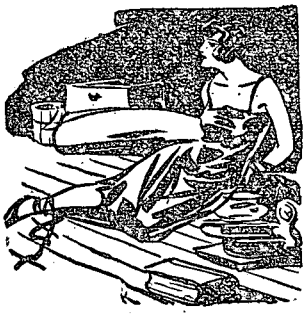
Moreno and Chimino slunk away to the Rafter Z. It was Jardine's own idea that the less men about the less suspicion would attach to the Fishtail. Ballard remained, however, to help Pink handle the prisoners, and to choose the first favorable opportunity to go west with Betty Summers. Ballard knew quite well that his employer's game would be called now, and that he might as well fade out of the picture. For a year he had coveted the SQ's pretty boarder; he had sworn to have her for his own, by fair means if possible, but to have her at all costs. Now she was in his hands; by a series of forced night marches he meant to take her with him to Arizona.

This night was too far spent for a start. Also Duke wanted to see Quiggs and collect his back pay, as well as secure camp equipment and horses. These preparations he decided to make tomorrow, leaving his prisoners as they were, departing with the girl the following night. What happened to Smith and Brisbane after he left did not concern him at all.



Morning came and Jardine handed a messy preparation of beef stew through the ceiling trap, with which Ballard fed the prisoners. He freed their hands so they could eat, although he kept their feet bound. He paid no attention to the tearful supplications of the girl in the rose, silk dress, nor to the baleful threats of Brisbane. Such were to be expected and Ballard ignored them, his greedy eyes feasting all the while on that frail pink shape in the gloom, as he leaned against a roof rafter and twisted his trimmed mustaches.

As for the cowboy, Smith, he remained remarkably quiet and well behaved. Realizing the futility of threats or complaints, the U Bar man kept silent, and began using his brain rather than his tongue.

SO DOCILE and easily managed became Smith that Ballard, after a while, paid him little attention. Thus he did not notice that Smith made a peculiar disposal of his own share of the beef stew. Once he was sure that Ballard was not watching him, Curly took one of the meat cubes from the stew, made a crevice in it, then poured into this crevice a tiny white crystal from a small bottle which he carried in the inside pocket of his coat.

After that Curly palmed the meat cube. The next time Ballard turned his back to call down through the trap to Jardine, Smith crammed the chunk of meat through an open space, just over his head, an aperture in the roof vacated by some wind-blown shingle. Physically this was an easy thing to do, for the roof was low and pitched. If a man were standing, he must stoop to avoid bumping his head on the ridge pole; and if he were prone, as was Curly at that moment, he could still reach the shingles near the eaves. These missing shingles were many and frequent. Almost with a random gesture Curly could poke his fingers through a hole and lay a cube of poisoned beef on the house roof.

At the noon meal this was easier yet, for Ballard was gone. It was Jardine who then brought up food, this time ham and bread. Curly doped nearly all of his and stuffed it on the roof.

Ballard had gone, so Smith judged from certain phrases spoken between the SQ foreman and Jardine, to see Quiggs, collect his pay and make preparations for some journey that night. It was half past three before he returned. Curly heard him tell Jardine that he had procured money and horses and would leave with the girl that night. Tomorrow, said Ballard, as soon as the country got a little quieter, Quiggs was coming to take Smith and Brisbane off Pink's hands.

It was just after Ballard's return that Curly heard a chattering just over his head. The sound assured him that he would kill one magpie at least. His idea was to slaughter a score of them. For surely a search party would visit the ranch. Lee McAfee would of course be in the crowd. Curly hoped that Lee would see a score of dead magpies about the yard—better still, on the roof. Knowing Curly as Lee McAfee did, would Lee be able to read that message—in black and white?

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ALL this while Curly had small opportunity to speak with Betty or Adam, or move close to them, because except at meals the prisoners were kept gagged and bound hand and foot. Curly's heart was bitter that Betty should suffer such brutal treatment; he could well imagine the torture to her body, and more yet to her fine, sensitive spirit. There he could see her, squeezed miserably between two floor joists, in a dusty, cobwebbed ratrun. As for the lawyer Brisbane, he was flung in a sprawl across joists. When they were silent, one might have peered into the attic and thought them just so many lumps of castaway rags, black and pink shadows in the gloom.

Shortly after four o'clock, the search party which Smith was hoping for arrived. Obviously the men downstairs saw them coming from a distance, for Ballard hastily ascended to the attic. He came for the double purpose of concealing himself and to more firmly secure the prisoners against sound or movement. He brought with him tie strings and additional gags. When he had finished his windings not a one of the trio of prisoners could have moved a muscle to save his life.

Ears were all that were left Curly Smith. He heard the voices of his friends, downstairs and outside. With all his strength he strained at his bonds in order to give one lusty kick on the joists; he knew that it would be his last for Ballard held a pistol at his head. Yet he strove and strained, though without avail. For a long time he had heard nothing from Brisbane, and had begun to believe that the lawyer was dead, suffocated.

He heard the voice of Andy Summers. How peculiarly sharp now, thought Curly, must be the torment in Betty's own heart, as she herself heard Andy's speech, so near and yet so far away! Smith listened for some mention of dead magpies in the yard, but in this he was disappointed. Perhaps he had killed but the single one he had heard chattering on the roof; or if more, maybe they had flown away to die in inconspicuous quarters.

Soon the party of searchers went away —to visit Sharpio and Quiggs, Smith knew by their talk. All hope faded from the cowboy's heart, for he knew they would find no clews there.

When the coast was clear Ballard ungagged and unbound the prisoners; it turned out that Brisbane was still alive, although he had almost passed away from lack of air. Smith himself was dizzy; he had given practically all of his food to the magpies, a sacrifice which now seemed to have been in vain.

BUT Curly was just game enough to try it again. When Jardine passed up the supper, more beef stew, the cowboy ate less than half of his share; the rest he poisoned and stuck through the cracks of the roof. There was a chance that searchers might return. But at best, Curly knew, his bait could produce no results till a new day, for the light through the cracks was failing. Night was coming on, when birds roost.

Soon after dark, Ballard picked up Betty Summers and passed her down through the trap to Jardine. Then Ballard went down himself, and did not again ascend to the attic. Neither did Curly see anything more of Betty Summers, and it was plain that the SQ foreman was making good his boast to take her away. Listening to the dialogue between Ballard and Jardine, downstairs, Smith heard Arizona mentioned, and assumed that this would be Ballard's ultimate destination.

Just before Ballard left, Curly heard

Jardine say, "Better take this canteen, Duke."

To which the other replied, "Naw, we won't need it; not the way we're goin'."

There was a stamping of horses out in front. Soon Curly heard the front door slam, heard Jardine call a parting farewell to Ballard, adding, "Sure am glad to get that girl off my hands."

The next sounds were those of hoof beats in the night, departing from the Fishtail in a westerly direction.

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IT WAS just getting light when Lee McAfee and Jim Pixlee took positions behind the Jardine grain crib. They had left their horses concealed in the bed of the Cimarron creek, some quarter of a mile behind them. They wanted to see if there were any more dead magpies on the premises than the one already noted by McAfee.

The light broadened, flooding brighter and brighter the environs of the Jardine house. It fell upon the curled and skewed shingles of the roof, crept down the adobe walls to the yard, spread till its rays threw into relief all things therein, living or dead.

By now domestic fowls were walking about. Birds of the air were awing; pigeons from the barn cupola, swallows from under eaves, chirped a welcome to the newborn day of spring. But these birds were not carnivorous, having no taste or smell for meat. Not so, however, with those other long-tailed thieves, darting from the corrals now with raucous, rowdy tongues. These latter seemed to find some peculiar magnet on the roof of the main house.

The latter were the ones which drew the attention of McAfee and Pixlee, spying from behind the crib. These and their dead. For not one black and white lump lay in the yard now but a score of them.

Time and again the watchers saw one of the greedy birds pounce upon some morsel on the roof, dart high into the air, then fall as though weighted with lead to the earth. Two or three of them now lay dead upon the roof itself.

The roof, asked McAfee of himself. Why the roof? And then, as the sunlight brightened, Lee saw a hand, a human hand, reach through the roof, between shingles, and drop something.

"Curly Smith!" cried Lee to Jim Pixlee.

They crept back to the creek bank to retrieve their horses. Leaping to the saddles they were off a-gallop to keep the tryst with Summers at the U Bar gate.

McAfee and Pixlee had not been gone from the Fishtail more than twenty minutes when four men came riding up to Jardine's door. They were Sol Quiggs, Joe Sharpio, Chip Chimino and Frank Slidell.

TRUE to the promise sent to Jardine by Ballard, Quiggs had come to relieve Pink of the two male prisoners. It was to be a simple method of disposal. All they had to do was to turn them over to Chimino and Slidell, who for three hundred dollars in hand paid to each, the receipt of which they therewith acknowledged as having been paid in advance, agreed to take Smith and Brisbane away, guaranteeing their non-return.

CHAPTER XIV

RAID OF THE FISHTAIL

WHEN Lee and Pixlee arrived at the U Bar gate, it lacked a little of being nine o'clock, the time set for the reunion of searchers. Therefore but a handful of these were assembled. Andy Summers, impatient to learn what the night had brought, was there; as were nine Folsom men, the three mountaineers from Trinchera Pass and a pair of Carrumpaw cowboys.

When Lee exploded his bombshell, there was no thought of waiting till the other possemen arrived. Without a word Andy Summers roweled his horse and was off at a swift gallop up the road. The others followed; hot were the tracks they made for the house of Pink Jardine.

Lee and Pixlee, who had come down the creek, learned from Summers who had been on the main road, that Quiggs and Slidell had been seen about an hour before turning into the Sharpio place. A Folsom man had seen them emerge, shortly afterwards, accompanied by Joe Sharpio and Chip Chimino. The four had taken an up-valley route. Pixlee was sure that they were going to the Fishtail, where no doubt they would take the prisoners out to be shot.

Sure enough, when the fifteen men galloped in at the Fishtail gate, they were just in time to see Chimino and Slidell emerge from Pink's house, bunting Smith and Brisbane, wrist-bound, in front of them. Seeing the racing oncomers, the killers jerked their victims back into the house and slammed the door.

The posse, headed by Summers, thun-

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dered on and up to the house, every man of the fifteen shooting now from the saddle, riddling Jardine's door with lead. From windows came return shots, and one of the two Carrumpaw cowboys fell from the saddle with a bullet in his lung. The rest kept on, burning the air in front of them. A shot from the house struck Andy's horse, killing it instantly and throwing Summers to the ground.

Up jumped the down-valley ranchman and on he went afoot. He saw a man dart from the back door of the house, making a run for the stable. Andy, who had lost his rifle in the fall, whipped out a six-gun and blazed away at the running man, whom he could see was Pink Jardine. The bullet struck Pink between the shoulder blades and put a permanent end to his flight.

Ten men were on the porch now, smashing at the door with butts of rifles. The pal of the Carrumpaw cowboy who had been shot from his saddle ran around to the back of the house. Just as the front door caved in those in front heard from him. Crack! Bang! Bang! Crack! Four quick shots from the rear. Lee McAfee ran around there and saw Sol Quiggs on the ground, dead. The Carrumpaw man was standing astraddle of his body, blazing away now with two guns into the open rear door.

More shots from in front.

Someone yelled, "Look out, that's Curly Smith."

Another voice cried, "And there's Ad Brisbane; are you hurt, Ad?"

Still another cried, "I can't see nothin' fer the smoke; where's Betty Summers?"

"Yes," cried Andy Summers in shrill hysteria; "where's my girl?"

THE house was choked with gun smoke. Lee, entering at the rear and feeling his way through it, stumbled over the body of a man; in a moment he saw that it was that of Joe Sharpio. Another step and another body, Chimino's. Then he came to Slidell.

Slidell was still alive. Through the haze Lee saw him crouching at the feet of Andy Summers. Summers had a pistol shoved against the man's head, and was yelling, "Where is my girl, damn you?"

"Honest to Gawd, I don't know," whined Slidell.

Summers could get nothing else out of him. In fact, there was a convincing ring to his denial, for he was in such a funk of terror it was easy to see he would have told anything to save his life.

Andy left him, running out into the yard to sweat the answer out of Quiggs. But Quiggs was dead; so was Sharpio; so was Jardine; so was the rat-faced Chimino. Only Slidell was alive, and Slidell did not know what those higher up than himself had done with Betty Summers.

A search revealed that she was not on the Fishtail. Then Curly Smith came out of a stupor and told what he knew. Duke Ballard had lit out with the girl, the night before, heading for Arizona.

Again, grimly and without a word, Andy Summers was off like a streak. Arizona or the next bend in the valley was all one to him. But, as before, a dozen men sprang to saddle to race along in his wake.

Lee McAfee was going, but he stopped for another word with Curly, and to pump Slidell. He could see that Slidell was in a mental condition to tell anything he knew.

"Why did Quiggs frame Jud McAfee for a rustler, and then lynch him to hide his own guilt?" he demanded of Slidell, prodding the man's adam's apple with his Colt.

Again Slidell denied knowledge. "I dunno," he bleated. "Only four men knew: Quiggs, Sharpio, Jardine and Ballard."

And three of these were dead! Duke Ballard alone now could reveal the motive of that lynching at the Cimarron ford. All the more reason to overtake Ballard, salvaging not only a woman, but the truth.

In any event Lee was hot to follow Summers. He was beginning to understand now how generously Betty had given him of her friendship, in spite of the fact he had misjudged her father and wronged

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herself. The fine nobility of her came to him now, and he sprang away from Slidell, heading out of the house to grab his horse.

"Wait a minute, Lee," cried Curly Smith, who was standing in the doorway like a man half doped. "I want to go with you."

"You come on later, Curly," Lee answered. "I gotta be there when they round up Ballard."

"Plenty of time," reminded Smith. "Ballard will only travel nights. He got as far as he could last night and is holed up somewhere for the day. It's not more than ten o'clock, and you got till sundown to catch up with him. Wait ten minutes and I'll be ready to travel with you."

There was logic in this; and Lee reflected that Curly was the kind who would always do to take along. Right now the cowboy was wobbly and stiff, from having been bound for thirty-six hours. However he was in better shape than Brisbane. The lawyer was in a serious condition, lying over there on Jardine's bunk and unable to stand on his feet.

SEVERAL Folsom men who had not followed Summers' excited and instantaneous dash for Arizona, a territory over three hundred miles away, agreed to remain at the Fishtail and take care of Brisbane, Slidell and the dead.

One of these made the remark that he was glad enough to see Pink and Chip scratched off the list, but that it was too bad about Quiggs and Sharpio, for they were both married men.

"On the contrary," refuted another, "a married crook needs killin' worst of all. His woman kin then git her a honest hombre. Quiggs' and Sharpio's widows are better off; and there'll be plenty of likely gents lookin' their way pretty soon—and at them good hay vegas, too."

By now Curly Smith had found a jug of choke-cherry wine, no doubt a present from Sharpio to Jardine. He drank about a quart of it, and it furnished him with both food and stimulant. In a little while he was able to sit a horse; whereupon he and Lee McAfee hit the trail for Folsom.

CHAPTER XV

UP THE CIMARRON

AS THEY rode along Curly told Lee about the girl's adventure in the Quiggs' kitchen, how she had found and concealed the discarded picture, braving the bulldozing threat of Sol Quiggs.

More than ever Lee's heart went out to her. She had been splendidly loyal, returning him good for evil. Any other girl he had ever known would, with buckling pride, have spurned him after his rudeness in the drug store. But this one seemed to have been made in a finer mold.

In his mind he saw her now as she had faced him across the pasture bars. She had seen Bill Ballard coming, known that Ballard was going to invite her to the dance, then with a perfect trust had chosen Lee in Ballard's stead. And now this other man had run away with her. McAfee dug spurs to his horse's ribs, swearing to run Ballard to earth if it were the last act of his life.

He was riding at breakneck speed; it

was all Curly Smith could do to keep up.

"Stop at Pixlee's barn as you go through," he heard Smith cry, a dozen lengths to the rear.

They were now galloping into Folsom. There McAfee, although he was impatient to be on after Summers, pulled up in front of Pixlee's barn.

Pixlee came out of the door just as they drew up. Lee was surprised to see him, for the liveryman had been one of those who had left the Fishtail in the train of Summers.

"I had to drop out for a while to put someone in charge of the barn," Pixlee explained. "I'm jest startin' now to ketch Andy."

"Wait a minute," said Curly Smith. "I

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reckon Andy struck out on the regular Raton trail, didn't he?"

"Sure," assented Pixlee. "How else would a man start out from Folsom to git to Arizony?"

"Is that the only road?" asked Curly.

"Sure is," answered Pixlee, who, being in the livery business, was naturally familiar with roads.

"Just the same I'm bettin' Ballard didn't go that way," returned Smith. "Remember I was startin' to Taos myself a few days ago, before I hooked up with the U Bar, and I had you log that trail fer me. I reckon it's the same one Summers is chasin' Ballard on, goin' from here around the south end of Capulin, fifty-five miles to Raton, then on to Taos, Santa Fé, Arizony and points west."

"That's right," agreed Pixlee, "but why shouldn't Ballard take it?"

"BECAUSE I remember you said it was a dry trail," replied Curly, "unless a feller stopped at ranches and towns. But Ballard, with a woman roped to a pack horse, wouldn't stop at ranches and towns. Now get this: just before he pulled out, Pink Jardine said, 'Better take this canteen, Bill,' to which Ballard answers, 'We won't need it; not the way we're goin'.' Which means Ballard figgered to follow creeks or a chain of lakes. Anyway he didn't aim to take out along no dry and blistered Santa Fé trail. He——"

"Gosh! You're right," broke in Pixlee. "Why didn't you tell Andy about that canteen talk? And anyway it stands to reason Ballard wouldn't take the main Santa Fé route, which is wide open and timberless most of the way, and well traveled."

"Andy took off hell bent after Ballard before I had time to tell him anything," defended Curly Smith. "Besides that I wasn't plumb come to yet."

Lee McAfee, who a few minutes ago had been nervously impatient to be off after Summers, was now well satisfied to deliberate further on this subject of route. "How might Ballard, encumbered as he was, make westing toward Arizona and still keep in a watered wilderness?" he asked Pixlee.

"Why, easy enough," answered the liveryman. "Wonder is I didn't think of it before. It'd be slow going, all right, but it'd be lonesome, watered and brushy all the way, which is just what the dang crook'd want. He'd foller straight on up the Cimarron from here, 'stead of leavin' it and goin' around the south corner of Capulin like Summers did. When he got to the head of the Cimarron he'd climb up outa the canyon onto Johnson Mesa. Then he could head due west almost square along the Colorado line, down a chain of mesas and not a town on 'em, and dang few people either, leadin' him in the end to the Culebra Mountains. From then on he could stay in rough and unsettled country all the way to Arizony."

"All right," snapped Lee decisively. "That's the road Curly and I are going to take. You go after Summers and turn half his posse back to follow us. The other half might as well keep on, playing a long shot that Ballard took the main road after all. Come on, Curly."

Without further comment Lee rode away, directly up the Cimarron. "I'm right with you, feller," cried Curly Smith, pulling abreast. The two were off at a smart gait.

ABOVE Folsom, the Cimarron is only a small creek. The valley here narrows swiftly into a sharp ravine, draining the water from the north slope of Capulin volcano and from the south slopes of Trinchera and Johnson mesas. A seldom traveled and rocky trail follows the bank, leading to a few isolated ranches and to a gap between the above mentioned mesas known as Trinchera Pass.

Not only was the trail stony but for some weeks the weather had been dry. Many cattle were then watering at the stream. Often Lee and Curly, as they rode along, disturbed clusters of these cattle lying in the trail, which was the one reasonably level bedding place in the ravine. These cattle had obliterated any sign which the horses of Ballard might have left. Thus tracking would have been difficult, and the pursuers pressed on without making any attempt to find sign.

"When we get up higher there ought to be lots of bush," suggested Smith. "That's

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where we'll look for sign—on the bush."

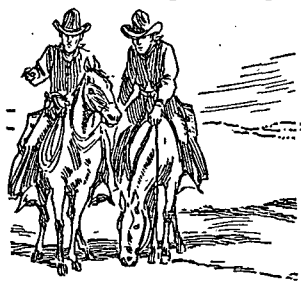
The ravine became a canyon; slopes steepened and at last became almost sheer. Soon thickets of capulin, or wild cherries, began to appear along the creek bank.

"Looks like the canyon forks up there ahead of us," exclaimed Smith, after they had ridden for several miles through the now bush-lined gorge.

"Sure does," answered McAfee. "And that's gonna put us in a hole about which fork to take."

Indeed in another half mile they came to a fork of the canyon, a junction where it split into two ravines of equal size, each with its own small stream, each with its own rocky trail. Ahead and above they could see the rimrock of Johnson Mesa, and the two men judged that either of the forks would give access to the mesa top. The question was—which should they follow?

"Sure does put us up in the air," agreed Smith, as they halted at the fork. "If we take the left fork, Ballard may be campin' up the right; and vice versa. You know I got it figgered he couldn't have got further last night than the head of one or the other of these two canyons. Likely he's holed up in one of them, waitin' to climb the mesa and streak down it tonight."



They dawdled for a while irresolutely. Lee's anxiety was increasing with every passing moment. More than anything he wanted to catch Ballard before that sun set. Betty Summers had already been a prisoner among thieves for two nights, and Lee would have given his life to save her from a third such humiliation. And now he didn't know which of these two forks to take.

WORST of all he wasn't sure that either of them was the track taken by Ballard. On either or both he might not be getting nearer to Betty Summers. Ballard's having taken this mountain route was only a theory, after all.

But suddenly the theory became a known fact.

"Look!" cried Curly Smith. "Lookee there on that bush!" Riding up to a capulin bush he picked from it a long, slender thread. The thread was silk, and the color of a pink rose. Beyond a doubt it had come from the dress of Betty Summers.

When Curly Smith had explained his find, Lee became intensely excited. It was no longer guess work. Now they *knew* Ballard had come this way. And it was reasonable to assume that they were close on his heels.

But which of the two forks had Ballard taken? The thread gave no clew to this, for it was found about a dozen yards below the spot where the trails diverged. Betty Summers could have lost the thread here and still have taken either route.

"I tell you," suggested Curly Smith. "We'll work both canyons, so's not to overlook no bets. You take the left branch and I'll take the right. We'll each look for sign—more threads or anything we can find. Maybe one of us'll run on to Ballard's camp itself. If either of us gets to the head of his canyon without findin' anythin', he'll turn back to the forks and take the opposite branch, ketchin' up with the other man. If they's nothin' in either canyon, we'll climb the mesa together and strike west along it, follering a chain of lakes Pix said was up there."

"All right," agreed McAfee, and spurred up the left trail. Curly Smith took the right. To the forks they knew Ballard had come. Now whichever of two possible ways he had gone he was followed.

Chapter XVI

To the Top of the Trail

CURLY SMITH, pushing up the right branch, had not gone more than a mile before he knew that it was he, and not McAfee, who would encounter Duke Ballard. Along his own trail he saw more sign, and plenty of it; there was another rose colored thread on a capulin, and he came to a place where, at this altitude, snow had drifted over the trail and was still unmelted. In this snow he saw the

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tracks of three shod horses, traveling up-creek.

Only for a moment did Smith consider turning back, to provide himself with the reinforcement of Lee McAfee. While he was doing that, Ballard might be on and away. For the shadows of dusk were falling over the mountains. Assuming that Ballard was holed up for the day in that canyon, he would be up and on now at any moment. Curly was confident that he could surprise the crook and capture him alone. He had not the slightest fear of meeting Ballard, man to man and single-handed. On the contrary nothing could suit him better; not only was he eager to avenge Betty Summers, but his own wrists and ankles were still smarting from rope cuts inflicted by the man's hands.

Thus Curly went on, cautiously but steadily, with drawn six-gun, half expecting to run into Ballard at every canyon bend, hoping he would, fully resolved to shoot it out on sight, and to kill.

Shorter became the straightaways of the canyon, and sharper its twists. Spongier became the soil of the trail, and more frequent the unmelted snow drifts. Sign was constant now, and——

Curly reined in short. He had just been about to round a sharp rocky bend, when from beyond it he heard a peculiar sound. It was no sound of nature; above the gurgle of the shallow, running brook which followed the channel of the gorge came another sound, from the brook, and yet alien to its own singsong voice. Curly thought it sounded like a man scraping a bucket along the gravel bed, a long, scratching scoop, such as one uses to fill a pail in the shallows. The riffles of the stream were only about two inches deep.

Now Curly heard a pouring of water on water, then another scrape on the gravel. Ballard, he guessed, was using one pail as a dipper to fill another. Without a moment's further hesitation the cowboy jumped his horse around the bend, saw indeed that Bill Ballard was kneeling by the brook, aimed his six-gun at Ballard's head and cocked it.

"Hands up, feller," he cried. "Turn around and say your prayers."

Ballard did whirl. Curly Smith was hoping the man would draw, but both to his surprise and disgust Ballard merely dropped the bucket and held his hands high. Even then Curly itched to pull the trigger. Never in his life had he wanted to do so as badly as now. Yet he could not do it with Ballard standing there in complete surrender, hands high.

Now Smith saw that there was an adobe hut against the cliff about ten yards to Ballard's left. Probably this was an old summer sheep camp which Ballard had used for the day's hole-up. That the man had been just about to go on was evident because there were three horses near the hut, two saddled and one with bulging pack. Ballard had just broken camp, Smith deduced, and had been on the point of getting a pail of water to put the fire out. There was a curl of smoke coming from a hole in the hut roof.

Of Betty Summers he saw nothing, and decided that she was still in the hut.

BUT now he walked his horse to Duke Ballard. Sticking the gun barrel on Ballard's quivering lip, upon the small, black mustaches which had given the man his name, Curly reached down and possessed himself, one at a time, of the two pearl-handled Colts from the prisoner's belt.

"Where's Miss Summers?" demanded Smith. "You ornery coyote, how I'd admire to nail your hide to a tree!"

Ballard's usually swarthy face was pale now, as he stood there in the gloom of dusk; obviously he was expecting sudden death. He jerked his head toward the left, indicating that Betty Summers was indeed in the hut. Just then her voice came tremulously from the inside.

"Oh, Curly, is that you? I'm in here, Curly."

Smith knew she must be bound, else she would have come out to greet him. The realization made him so spitefully hot with

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rage that he smashed his gun barrel down on Ballard's head. From the superior height of the saddle the blow had killing power, crashing down on the man's brain and dropping him like a sledge-struck ox. For a moment Smith thought, and hoped, he had killed him. Then he saw Ballard move and knew the man was alive.

But he was down and out, Curly knew.

Taking Ballard's pearl-handled guns with him, he rode to the door of the hut. Inside of it he saw again, as in the attic of the Fishtail, the glow of pink silk in the gloom. Above it was the face of Betty Summers, frail and pale. She was seated on, and bound to, a rickety camp bench. Again Curly wanted to turn and send five slugs through the coward by the brook.

Instead he dismounted, stepped within the hut, whipped out a knife and slashed viciously at the girl's bonds. When they were severed she stood weakly to her feet, smiled a pale smile, then swayed wearily into his arms.

She began to cry, and the cowboy patted her comfortingly on the shoulders, his big heart overflowing with compassion. After a moment he led her out of the gloomy, smelly hut; the air of the twilit canyon was purer and he wanted to keep an eye on Ballard.

Over by the brook he saw the man, a lump of flesh at the riffles' edge;

"Is he dead?" whispered Betty after a while, when she had discerned Ballard in the gloom.

"Not yet but soon, let us hope," answered the cowboy, scowling at the figure by the brook. "Forget him, girl. You're on your way back home and he's on his way to hell."

WITH a shudder Betty turned her back on Ballard. "Did you come by yourself, Curly?" she asked.

"No," answered Smith. "Lee McAfee come as far as the forks; he took up the left branch and I took up the right. Set down on that rock, Miss Betty, and get yourself pulled together. We'll wait here for Lee, who's probably found out he's in the wrong pew, and has turned back to foller me. When he shows up we'll go home."

"And him?" asked Betty, stealing another glance over her shoulder at Ballard. "Oh! I thought I saw him—move!"

"He did move," answered Smith, whose eyes had all the while been watching the prone figure by the brook.

"Did you say Lee—Mr. McAfee—came after me, too?" she asked timidly, without looking at Curly Smith.

"Did he?" exclaimed Curly. "He sure didn't do nothin' else. That feller McAfee's been half loco since he hearn you disappeared. He was the one who first seen them magbirds I painted the roof with. I'll bet he ain't slept a wink for two days, or et as much grub as you could balance on yer knife. Your pap, and the whole country has been sweatin', but even your old man didn't take it no harder than Lee McAfee. That feller's sure a fool about you, Miss Betty. He——"

"That couldn't be," interrupted the girl, not quite as pale as she had ben a moment before. "Mr. McAfee hates me; he wouldn't even speak to me."

"Don't let that fool you none," answered Curly Smith. Once Curly had had dreams about Betty himself; long ago he had learned she was not for him, and now was glad enough to further the case of his friend Lee McAfee. "What had him peeved was because his uncle got strung to a limb, and he thought your pap was in on it. Now he knows Andy just went up there to make 'em turn Jud over to a jury."

"Yes," said Betty quickly, "and I know still more about it now. Ballard, thinking we were safely away, told me the Quiggs' motive in the affair of Judson McAfee."

"That so? Fair enough!" exclaimed Smith, remembering that, according to Slidell, Ballard was now the only living man who could give this testimony, testimony which alone could clear the McAfee name. "What was this motive?" he asked. Inasmuch as they had to wait for Lee, Curly figured that it would be well for the girl to talk, a thing which might partially dispel the nervous tension of the wait.

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THIS she did. "It seems," explained Betty, recounting a tale told her by Ballard, "that ten years ago Judson was convicted of a killing in California. There was evidence of self defense, but the dead man had been a power in the county and Judson, a nomad without friends, received a sentence of thirty-five years. A fellow convict, serving a short term, was Quiggs. Judson escaped, coming east to New Mexico and starting the U Bar. Quiggs served his own short term, after which he looked up an old gangster friend, Pink Jardine. While on a visit at Jardine's, he ran into Judson. Later, with the deliberate intention of blackmail he settled just below the U Bar on the Cimarron. But look, Curly,"—Betty interrupted her own story—"didn't I see Ballard move again?"

"Yep, but I'm watchin' him," answered Smith, wagging his gun toward the brook. "Go on."

"About two years ago, Quiggs, who had formed a calf stealing partnership with Jardine and Sharpio, began blackmailing Judson into covering up steals. The threat was to inform the California authorities about Judson, thus making him complete what was equivalent to a life sentence. Jud was not required to steal himself, and did not. Sharpio, Jardine and Quiggs would do the stealing, putting Jud's U Bar on the calves, also bobbing the tail tips for later identification. As soon as any hue and cry which might arise was over, they would claim their tail-bobbed calves and sell them at Santa Fé rail points in Colorado. Thus Judson took all the risk in case of discovery, and all the while the California prison threat was hanging over him."

"How did the game happen to get busted up?" asked Smith.

"First, Judson was getting a bad reputation in the valley, on account of his not being able to explain the constantly changing tally of his young stock. Ballard believes that is why he suddenly sent for Lee McAfee, to use Lee as a means of personal escape. Very likely his idea was to turn the place over to his nephew, against whom the Quiggs' threat would be without teeth, and skip out himself. Thus he would dodge Quiggs and the California sentence, as well as salvage his property for a kinsman. Anyway he had stood all he could. The only cowboys he could hire were the shady, ask-no-questions kind, which made his own repute worse.

"Then one day a Carrumpaw stockman missed a calf and trailed it to the U Bar pasture. Having long suspected Judson, he had planted a small tin star, a tobacco tag with his own initials scratched on it, in the calf's ear, using it really as a decoy to convict Judson. Sure enough, the calf trailed to the U Bar pasture wore this tag. Being alone, the stockman was too discreet to ride up to the house and accuse Jud, so he called the nearest neighbors and explained his find. These neighbors were of course Quiggs, Sharpio and Jardine. They saw that the game was up and that Jud must not be allowed to talk. So they sent Duke Ballard and the Carrumpaw stockman down-valley to collect the ranchmen for a creek bank trial, they themselves agreeing to capture Judson and his men. This they did; and when the crowd from down-valley arrived, the prisoners were already hanged. Quiggs claimed that all five of them had confessed, so what was the use of waiting? My father and others protested, but it was too late. No one doubted Judson's guilt, as the Carrumpaw stockman was of sterling reputation. Anyway the thing was done and——"

JUST then, in the gathering darkness, Betty's story was interrupted by the roar of a gun, twelve yards to the right. From the ground at the brookside spat a spiteful tongue of flame. Curly Smith, who had been lulled to inattention by the narrative, threw up his hands, his gun flying from his grasp; he staggered two steps, hands to throat, then fell face down with a bullet in his neck.

Over yonder by the brook Bill Ballard sprang to his feet. Betty stifled a shriek as he came running her way, with a short-barreled arm holster gun in his hand. This he now threw away, snatching up the heavier weapon dropped by Curly Smith, then taking a second Colt from Curly's belt. With the two, he turned mockingly upon Betty Summers.

"Who's on the way to hell now?" he jeered. "And who's goin' home? You're

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goin' home, with me, to Arizona."

Then, from down the canyon, Betty heard the approaching drum of hoofs, a single horse was coming at a lope. Duke Ballard heard it, too. He had not heard the approach of Smith some half hour ago, because Smith, expecting trouble, had approached cautiously. But now Lee McAfee was coming, with natural incaution because he believed Curly between himself and the enemy. With complete comprehension of the situation, Ballard faced himself and his guns down-canyon.

"The tenderfoot, huh!" he grunted. "I heard what Smith said. If his pal didn't find me in the other fork, he'd join Smith up this'n. All right; here I am. He'll see me through smoke. Soon's I get him I'll come back fer you."

The loping horse approached swiftly up the ravine. Ballard ran twenty paces down the trail to the cliff bend, peered around it, holding Curly's two heavy guns, then drew back in alert ambush. In a nauseating dread Betty Summers watched him, waiting for Lee McAfee to come swinging around that bend to his doom. The twilight was gone now, nor had the moon risen beyond the mesa. Only in starlight could the girl see Ballard, as he crouched behind the ledge to waylay McAfee.

Was Curly dead? He was still, with his head in a pool of blood. Kneeling in a hysteria of horror beside him, feeling that all the good and lovely hopes of life were again crushed, Betty Summers stared through the night at the back of the ambushed Ballard.

AT THE very bend now was Lee's horse. Betty saw the animal's head take shape in the gloom at the turn. In that same split second she screamed. Shrilly her shriek echoed through the canyon, and it inevitably struck a spark of kindred fear in the heart of the horse itself. Hearing it, coming suddenly from the dark trail ahead, and seeing a colorful shape, alien to those familiar, a pinkish glow in the night, the horse of Lee McAfee stopped suddenly on two rear hoofs. Abruptly it checked its flight, rearing upright just as Ballard fired twice at Lee McAfee. From the right and left gun of Ballard flashed a flame, aimed at the rider, burning instead the shoulder of a rearing horse.

For McAfee had left the saddle; not expecting the abrupt halt, he had been thrown headlong into the creeklet by the trail. The shriek of Betty Summers saved his life. In the darkness the girl saw the stop, the rear of the horse, the flash of guns and the plunge of a spilled rider. She screamed again. Her hands clutched at the shoulders of Curly Smith, found his throat, became red with blood flowing from a wound at the base of his neck, yet she was not conscious that she touched him at all.

At her second scream the horse of McAfee, still upreared like a trained bear, whirled to retreat down canyon. Whirling, its fore hoofs struck the gunman Ballard, who was standing abreast, in the foot of space between horse and cliff.

Ballard went down, one gun leaving his hand. The horse, now turned, retreated down the canyon. The sound of its retreat became one with the roars of flame-tongued guns. Ballard, from a sprawl by the cliff, was shooting toward the brook.

In this brook lay McAfee, in a like sprawl; now he came to his knees and Betty Summers saw an answering flash from his hand. He shot again, at the man by the cliff.

Crack! from the trail. Bang! from the creek. Flash for flash they shot it out. Three times again spoke the gun of Ballard, and thrice the gun of McAfee. Then the figure by the cliff slumped, his sprawl flattened in the dust; and the one in the brook arose to a stooping height. Betty saw Lee move with a stumbling step toward her. He asked, "Are you all right?"

The only answer he could make out was a sob from the girl, and the familiar voice of Curly Smith:

"Ouch! Betty; you're chokin' me. And who the heck was doin' all that shootin'?"

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HIS BROTHER'S KEEPER

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Letters from a Home-Made Cowboy," "The Wages of Greed," etc.

WHEN THE SHERIFF OF CALOR STARTED OUT INTO THE BAD LANDS AFTER RED COWAN, MEN WOULD HAVE BET THAT HE WOULD GET HIS MAN. BUT THE DESERT GODS SAW STRANGE JUSTICE BEFORE THE LAW WAS SATISFIED

IT WAS always hot in the Bitter Water Valley, and the hills were like rumpled yellow and gray blankets, shimmering in the summer sun. Folks didn't tan there—they simply charred. The winds were hot, even in the shade—when there was any wind.

The old dirt road, inches deep in dust, wound in and out among the old lava beds, like a long, yellow worm, with its head in the town of Calor, its few tails ending at the scattered ranches. The valley was not a summer resort, and those who were financially able went into the far mountains to escape the heat.

Along this winding, yellow road came a team and wagon, almost hidden in a cloud of dust, which drifted up from wheel and hoof like the smoke from a foundry stack. On the seat were a man and a woman, and in the back of the wagon was a single trunk, already dust covered.

The woman had a scarf twisted about her mouth and nose, while the man's face to his eyes was covered with a bandana handkerchief; two masked figures, their dusty eyes blinking, red-rimmed. Their conversation was limited; had been limited for several weary miles, but now they struck a slight raise, where the dust was less deep.

"I had to do it, Joe," said the woman, as though picking up the conversation of an hour gone. "I just had to."

"I know it, Mrs. Deming," said the man nodding slowly. "I seen it comin'."

He spat dryly, still nodding. "I told Jim. I told him he was a fool. But," resignedly, "yuh can't tell him nothin'. Bull-headed as hell, Jim is. He read me the riot act. Said fer me to mind my own business."

"And he'll fire you, Joe."

The man turned slowly and looked at the woman. She had removed the scarf now. Mrs. Jim Deming, wife of Jim Deming, sheriff of Calor, had been a pretty girl in her youth. She was still pretty, except that her hair was gray and her once smooth face was creased with deep lines. Her gray eyes were clouded with sadness, as she looked at Joe Mills, her husband's deputy.

JOE was tall, thin, harsh-faced, burned to the color of a dark Indian. Joe Mills was as hard as the lava beds, but he had found a man harder than he. Jim Deming, known as "Duty" Deming, was so hard that he rather appalled even Joe Mills.

"Yeah, he'll fire me," agreed Joe slowly. "But that's fine, ma'am. I'm kinda sour on this county, anyway. Seems to me that I'd

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kinda like to go somewhere else, where there's green grass and lakes. I've allus lived here, yuh see. Don't you worry about me, ma'am; you've got a-plenty to worry about for yourself."

"Thank you, Joe. I'm glad you don't blame me. It had to come. He—he wasn't so bad until they elected him sheriff. We got along, yuh know. Goin' onto three years now. I—I hoped they'd defeat him last election."

"Shore. Prob'ly been better if they had. But they say he's the best sheriff they ever had—I dunno."

"Because he sent my son to prison," she said painfully.

"Yeah. It was his son, too."

"Joe, you know Harry wasn't a thief, don't yuh?"

"I don't reckon he was. The JB outfit started out to git Harry—and they got him."

"His own father got him, you mean!" exclaimed Mrs. Deming. "Jim was alone when he found that evidence at Harry's place. It was nothing but a JB hide. Jim could have buried it and warned Harry. That hide was planted there by the JB. But Jim took the evidence and arrested Harry. Ten years! It was Jim's evidence that sent my boy to the penitentiary."

"Yes, ma'am."

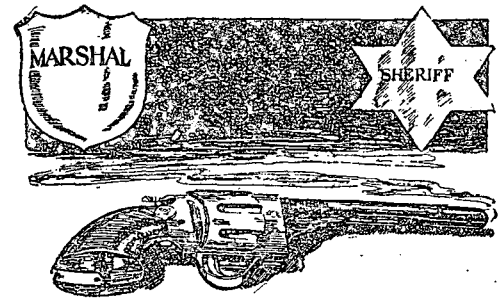
"And he sent Al Seymour up for stealing a horse, which he didn't steal. Al was drunk that night and got the wrong one. It was wrong for him to get drunk, I know; but he didn't intend to take the wrong horse. Jim knew it. Oh, yes, he did. But he went straight out and arrested Al, instead of bringing the horse back. He could have explained it all. Al was no thief."

"He was going to marry Jane, wasn't he, Mrs. Deming?"

"Yes. It broke her heart, Joe. I'm going to her now. Oh, I've pleaded with Jim; talked and pleaded until my throat was raw. But what's the use? He defends himself by saying that he swore to uphold the law, and both Harry and Al broke the law. His duty to the law! He sits in judgment on this whole desert; brags about his iron hand. Oh, it's iron, all right. It smashed his home; it will smash him, too."

"I dunno; he's pretty hard, ma'am. I never knowed a man as hard as Jim, and I've knowed a lot of hard ones. His job is a religion with him."

"And some day it will raise up and kill him."



"His star is his god," said the deputy slowly.

"And don't the Bible say something about thou shalt have no other gods before me?"

"Mebbe. I dunno much about the Bible. I don't reckon that God operates much around here—it's too hot."

"I've wondered about it," she said wearily. "I've prayed a lot, Joe; but nothing came of it."

"Too hot, Mrs. Deming. I don't reckon a fried prayer ever got any further than a fried aig. Mebbe not as far, because yuh can eat the aig. Well, there's the town. Yuh've got plenty time, 'cause the train ain't never on time. Lotsa folks would miss the train if it ever came on time."

THE train was of the mixed variety, half passenger, half freight; a branch line train, using something like seven hours to complete the sixty mile run from Santa Leone to Levering, which was twenty miles south of Calor.

Calor was the usual desert type of town. Perhaps a little larger, due to the fact that it was a county seat, but the buildings were unpainted, scourged by wind and sand, until they blended nicely with the gray of the desert. Two huge water tanks, thrusting their ungainly bulk upward on their scaffolding, like huge, rotund giants, with spindling legs, supplied the town with water, which was always warm.

The depot had once been painted a bright red, but time had dimmed its luster until it was a sickly pink, where any color yet remained.

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The team came up to the depot platform, guided in close to the high platform. The deputy helped the woman down, and unloaded the trunk. He tied both horses securely to the platform, because they were unused to trains, and then began twisting the trunk around to the front, the woman following him.

The telegraph wires hummed in the hot wind, and there was a strong odor of pitch frying up from the planks of the platform. A man stood near the doorway to the waiting room; a tall, lean figure of a man, harsh of feature, his gray eyes deep set under beetling brows, and separated with a high-arched nose. His mouth was wide and thin lipped.

In raiment he was practically the same as ninety-nine per cent of the desert men; well-worn sombrero, colorless shirt, stringy vest, overalls, from which the color had long since fled, tucked in the tops of high-heeled boots. Around his lean waist hung a belt and holstered gun, and on the lapel of his vest gleamed the insignia of office. Such was Duty Deming, sheriff of Calor.

He shot one sharp glance at his deputy, who handled the trunk awkwardly as he rolled it out near the edge of the platform. The woman stopped short and studied the face of her husband.

"You didn't think I'd come, did you?" she asked.

"If I hadn't, I wouldn't be up here," he said slowly.

The deputy walked from the trunk to the waiting room. He had Mrs. Deming's ticket, and was going to check the trunk. The sheriff's eyes followed him.

"You don't need to blame Joe," she said.

His eyes shifted from the doorway and came back to her.

"You're not sorry?" she asked.

"What for? I've got nothing to be sorry about."

"After thirty years, Jim?"

"No. You said you'd go away. I've provided for yuh all these years, and——"

"And sent my son to prison; drove my daughter away."

His jaw set grimly for a moment. "Well?"

"I guess that's all, Jim."

They were silent now. Came the soft humming of the rails, as the train came creeping through the desert. The telegraph instrument in the office clanked spasmodically.

"They call you Duty," she said bitterly. "And you're proud of it. You think more of that than you do of your family. Your evidence ruined the happiness of your daughter; your evidence ruined my happiness."

"I swore to do my duty," he said slowly.

"I raised my right hand and swore to uphold the law. It doesn't mean that an officer can be lenient to *anybody*. I've been the best sheriff this county ever had, and I'll keep on bein' the best sheriff. The voters put their trust——"

"I've heard all that, Jim. I'm going away now; going to be gone forever. I'll never come back to the desert—to you. You've made a god of your job, Jim. Maybe they'll put up a monument to you some day."

THE train whistled shrilly, as it came into view. The deputy came out and gave Mrs. Deming her ticket and her trunk check.

"Thank you, Joe," she said, holding out her hand. They shook hands, and she turned her back on her husband, watching the train come in. There were only a few people at the station. The engine clanked past and the train ground to a stop. The sheriff's eyes were looking down the train, and without a word he walked away from his wife and strode down the platform.

She looked curiously after him, but he did not look back. So this was his good-by. Stifling a sob she climbed up the steps of the coach and went inside, while the agent's helper threw her trunk in the baggage car.

Duty Deming walked down to a box-car and hunched on his heels, speaking to a man who clung to the rods beneath the car.

"Come out of that," he ordered gruffly.

The man slowly edged off the rods and almost fell headlong. His legs were cramped from the uncomfortable position, and he was black with dirt and sand; his

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clothes driven full of it.

"Stealin' a ride, eh?" grunted the sheriff.

The hobo straightened up, looked around through bloodshot eyes, which finally came back to the sheriff. The train was moving again.

"What's the big idea?" asked the hobo hoarsely. "What right have you to drag me off here? You're just a hick sheriff and this is a little town. I was just travelin'."

"Stealin' a ride," said the sheriff grimly. He did not look up as the coaches passed him. "You know it's agin the law, young man."

"That's up to the railroad company. Or do you own this particular branch?"

"No, I don't own the railroad," replied the sheriff harshly, "but I do represent the law around here."

"Represent it, eh?"

THE hobo sighed deeply and looked at the passing coaches. The sheriff did not look at them.

"Hot ridin' under there," said the hobo. "I was just heading out of this country. Tough riding, I'll tell you; but they had all them box-cars sealed. Still, I could have made it to Levering."

"Well, yuh didn't!" snapped the sheriff.

"That's true. Still, you haven't any rock pile. All you can do is to put me in jail and feed me. That's not a profitable thing. Better let me sit here in the shade, until the next train comes along."

"And let you steal another ride, eh?"

"What do you care, as long as you don't own the railroad?"

"I'm paid to uphold the law," said the sheriff stiffly.

The hobo sighed wearily, as he scraped his heel against the cinders.

"Do you always uphold the law?"

"Always—that's what I'm here for."

"A little authority has made you your brother's keeper, eh?"

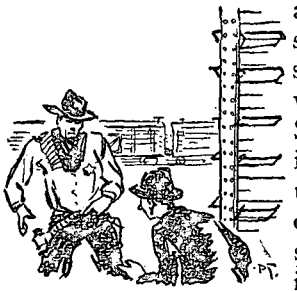
"I'm the sheriff."

"Oh, I can see that. But what right have you to haul me off that train? It isn't your train. You're not paid to guard that train, are you. Don't shove me. Can't you see I'm a sick man?"

"Sick man!" sneered the sheriff. "Sick because I'm goin' to lock yuh up for a few days. Don't play 'possum with me."

"I'm not playing 'possum, as you say; I'm sick."

The man really looked sick, in spite of his grimy face, but the sheriff twisted him around by the shoulder and started him toward the jail. Several persons, including the deputy, waited on the depot platform to see what the sheriff was going to do, and as the sheriff marched his prisoner past them he told the deputy to come with him.



THE deputy followed down to the jail, where the hobo was locked behind the bars. The deputy made no comment, but followed the sheriff back to the office, where they sat down.

"Said he was sick," remarked the sheriff disgustedly.

"Looked sick," said the deputy wearily, fanning himself with his sombrero.

The sheriff studied the lean face of his deputy for a length of time. "How did you happen to bring the old lady in today, Joe?" he asked.

"She asked me to. I came past the ranch. I told her I'd take the team back and get my horse. She was comin', anyway," as though to defend his position in the matter.

"She was, eh? You never stopped to think that you were workin' for me, did yuh? You waste a day, bringin' her in, and waste another day in goin' back with that team. Do you think I'm payin' you to use up time that way?"

The deputy flushed slightly and his lips tightened.

"I didn't know that *you* paid me anythin', Deming. Ain't I paid by the county?"

"I'm part of that county, Joe; the sheriff part of it. I hired yuh, didn't I?"

The deputy got slowly fom his chair and put on his hat.

"You hired me, Deming, but I'll be damned if you fire me; I quit right now."

"All right; suit yourself."

"I intend to, Deming. In fact, I intend

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ed to quit yuh when I came down here. You never even told yore wife good-by; just walked away to arrest a hobo, who wasn't doin' you any harm. Yo're plumb loco over duty, ain't yuh? I'm scared of yuh, Jim; honest, I am. Yore wife said you was worshippin' that tin god on yore vest; that sheriff's star. I reckon yuh are.

"She said somethin' about it raisin' up and killin' yuh. Said somethin' about what the Bible said about not havin' wrong gods. I don't sabe just what she meant. But I do sabe how she feels toward yuh. Deming, you've gone crazy over duty to the law. It's all right to enforce the law, but yo're just a damn' fool over it. I knowed you was crazy when yuh sent Harry to the pen. You didn't need to do it, and you know yuh didn't. Oh, I'm glad I quit yuh."

Deming's face flushed hotly and he started to rise from his chair, but sank back heavily, a queer expression in his hard gray eyes.

"What did she mean by sayin' that it would rise up and kill me?" he demanded. "That's fool talk; women's talk. Nobody can scare me. I'm glad yuh quit, if yuh feel the way yuh do about me—and yore job. You didn't always fulfill yore oath, Joe. Mebbe it's best that yuh did quit. I'm goin' to be more particular in the next deputy I hire."

"They'll probably be, too," said Joe. "You'll have a hell of a time hirin' a new man, 'cause everybody knows how hard yuh are, Deming. Well, I'll pack my stuff and get out."

"All right, Joe; give me your star. And them ca'tridges in yore belt belong to the county."

SEVERAL days passed in which Deming was obliged to run the office alone, which meant that twice a day he must carry food to his prisoner, against whom no formal complaint had been made. But the hobo was far too ill to care whether he had food or freedom. He spent most of the time on his cot, talking deliriously, and in the dim light of the little cell the sheriff could see nothing wrong with the man, except a fever.

But finally he called in the doctor, who was also the coroner, and he immediately pronounced it a malignant case of smallpox; quarantining the jail. He was minded to quarantine the sheriff, but while he was making up his mind just what to do a cowboy, Slim Delong fairly tore up the street of Calor, bringing news of a murder.

Delong was fairly incoherent. Red Cowan, another cowboy working for the JB outfit, had murdered Al Mitchell, owner of the outfit, and had headed for the lava beds. Delong, riding in at the ranch, had seen Red Cowan riding away swiftly toward the lava bed country, and a few minutes later he had found Mitchell lying on the front porch, shot through the heart.

MITCHELL was a big cattleman in that part of the country, and the sheriff's son had been sent to the penitentiary for stealing Mitchell's cattle. The town was rather in an uproar over the murder, but the sheriff did not ask any of the cowboys to ride with him.

He saddled his roan horse, tied a quantity of food to his saddle, filled a canteen and headed for the lava bed country. He did not need help. He knew every inch of the lava bed country, although he did not know Red Cowan. Red had only been there a short time, and he had heard Joe speak of meeting him at the JB.

Shortly after Delong had delivered his message to the sheriff, Delong imbibed a few drinks, before starting back to the JB ranch with the coroner and several others, who were going out there to bring the body to town. He happened to be riding a half-broke bronco, and in the flurry at the hitchrack, as they were starting out, Delong's horse bucked wickedly, throwing Delong against one of the hitchrack posts.

In the parlance of the range, it knocked Delong flatter than a snake's belly, and he was unable to get on his horse; so they half carried, half led him back to the saloon, where they left him propped up in a chair.

THE sheriff did not hurry his horse. He swung in west of the JB ranch and headed for the lava bed country, making no attempt to pick up the tracks of Red's horse. He knew that Red would cut

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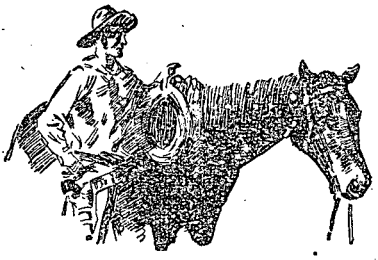
straight through the lava beds and head for the Mesquite River country, sixty miles away; sixty miles of waterless waste, a broken mass of twisted lava, which seemed never to have cooled since those prehistoric days, when it had been poured indiscriminately over the landscape.

The sheriff felt reasonably certain that



Red Cowan had started without any preparations for food or water, and would probably expect, at least, to find water. But there was no water in that part of the country. And a man must ride slowly, because the sharp lava would soon ruin the feet of his horse, unless the animal was allowed to make its own pace.

Mile after mile he plodded along, squinting his eyes against the glare of the sun, until he developed a queer sort of a headache; a dull throb in the back of his head, which caused him to wince at times. It bothered his eyes. He drank from his canteen, but the water did not seem to quench his thirst.

His mouth felt dry a moment later; so he took another drink, which caused him a slight nausea. Must be the sun, he decided. Still, the idea did not seem so good, because he was used to the sun. It made him angry. After a while he filled and lighted his pipe, but after the first few puffs of the pungent weed, he put the pipe in his pocket.

AHEAD of him stretched the interminable wastes of the lava beds, where the heat devils danced before his eyes, and he cursed them aloud, as though they could heed his voice. Then it seemed as though he realized the utter absurdity of such things, and cursed himself.

The setting sun found the sheriff riding aimlessly. His eyes ached continuously now, and he had lost all desire to scan the country. But he was not going to turn back. He was following a murderer, a cold-blooded killer, and the law must be avenged.

He felt a little better when the sun went down and the short desert twilight had blended with the night; a time in which the temperature drops swiftly from a hundred and fifteen in the shade to sixty in the dark. The sheriff had ridden away without any blankets, and now he shivered in a sudden chill, which seemed to crinkle his vertebræ.

Queer thing, that chill. It rattled his teeth like castanets and increased his headache until every movement of the horse brought him fresh misery. So he dismounted uncoiled his lariat and picketed his horse. It was only after several minutes that he was able to summon enough energy to remove the saddle.

Duty Deming was a sick man—and knew it. He thought of saddling his horse and heading for Calor, but he had lost all sense of direction. The stars blurred in his eyes, and he flopped down beside his saddle, burying his aching head in his arms.

IT WAS possibly two hours later that the sheriff's horse nickered softly in the darkness, but the sheriff did not lift his head. Came the sound of a horse walking, and the bulky form of a horse and rider came in through the broken rocks, plainly visible by the light of the stars.

The rider drew rein near the picketed horse, as though rather surprised to find a horse there. He dismounted and discovered the rope, speaking softly to the horse. He turned away and soon discovered the sheriff.

"Sleepin' kinda heavy, ain't yuh, pardner?" he asked in a soft, drawling voice; but the sheriff did not move.

Coming in closer, the man scratched a match. He was of medium height, thin-faced, blue-eyed, dressed in a faded blue shirt, well-worn bat-wing chaps, black Stetson. The light of the match glistened on the butt of a big Colt in the holster swinging at his thigh. As he removed his hat to shield the match the light glistened on his copper-colored hair.

He was Red Cowan, the murderer. He

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knelt down beside the sheriff and shook him by the shoulder.

"Wake up, pardner," he said softly, but the sheriff merely grunted and began mumbling deliriously.

"Sick, eh?" muttered the red headed one. "Funny. Got a bad fever and he's plumb loco. And it's a long ways to a doctor. Jist what'll I do next?"

HE SQUATTED on his heels and rolled a cigarette. After due deliberation and another cigarette he saddled the sheriff's horse. The sheriff was not easy to arouse, but he talked steadily, mumbling his words, swearing and laughing foolishly, while Red Cowan swung him into the saddle and roped him on. He swayed forward, both arms dangling loosely, while Cowan mounted his own horse and picked up the lead-rope.

Cowan took his bearings from the North Star, and started out, looking back at the humped figure of the sheriff, swaying in the saddle.

"Stay with her, pardner," he grunted. "We'll make the old Alkali Spring ranch by mornin', and mebbe we'll find somebody there."

And all through the night they wended their way through the lava beds, and it was just about daybreak when they came out at an old tumbledown ranch house. The old buildings seemed about to fall down, the corrals were in bad repair, and only one fan was left on the old windmill, which creaked in the morning breeze.

Down by the old stable was an alkali spring, where a few cattle, drifters from the herds in the Mesquite River ranges, came to drink. Red Cowan looked them over appraisingly. They meant fresh meat.

He unroped the sheriff and lifted him to the ground, propping him against the wall, while the went inside. The inside of the house was not as bad as the exterior, as it had been used by some cattlemen during a recent roundup. There was a roll of blankets, tightly wrapped in a tarpaulin, swinging from a rafter, while from a tightly closed box he took flour, baking powder, salt, sugar, beans and some cans of vegetables and fruit.

"Thought there might be a cache here," he said, as he removed the provisions.

He took down the bed-roll and spread it out on one of the bunks, before going out after the sheriff, whom he dragged in and put to bed. He looped the sheriff's belt around a bunk post, removed his clothes, and prepared a breakfast, before attending to the horses.

THE sheriff was burning with fever, tossing his arms, mumbling incoherently all the while.

After a breakfast, in which the sheriff did not join him, Cowan brought a pail of the cold water to the house and proceeded to give the sheriff a sponge bath. This treatment seemed to sooth the sick man, and he dropped into a slumber.

Cowan found an old pair of hopples, which he put on the sheriff's horse, and turned his own mount loose to forage. There was little to be done. Cowan did not want to leave the sick man long enough to go after a doctor, which would take at least two days; so there was only one thing for him to do, and that was to stay and see it through, hoping that someone might come along and lend them a hand.

For the next three days and nights he worked with the sheriff. There were no medicines of any kind, and it seemed to be a losing battle. He killed a steer and made beef broth, which the sheriff could not eat, gave him both cold and hot baths, worked over him like a mother over a child, and on the evening of the third day the sheriff awoke—conscious for the first time.

AFTER a period of deliberation he remembered starting out after Red Cowan. Seated near the bed, his head in his hands, snoring loudly, was a red-headed man. The sheriff did not know any red-headed men. He was very weak; so he shut his eyes and tried to think. After a while he heard the man move, and opened his eyes.

"That's better," said the red-head wearily.

"Who are you?" asked the sheriff, and

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was surprised that his voice was so weak.

"I'm Red Cowan."

The sheriff closed his eyes quickly.

"I guess I don't know yuh," he said slowly.

"Mebbe not. I was with the JB a while. What's the matter with yuh, anyway? You've been here three days."

"Three days?" The sheriff's eyes popped open.

Red told him all about it.

"Didn't have no medicine," he explained. "Had to do the best I could."

"Know who I was?"

"Saw yore star. Yo're Deming of Calor, ain't yuh? Yeah, I thought yuh was. I've heard of yuh. How'd yuh happen to be out there in the lava beds?"

The sheriff closed his eyes, thinking swiftly. Cowan must not know why he was out there.

"I dunno," he said. "Took sick. Must have ridden a long ways."

"You picketed yore horse."

"Oh, I wasn't plumb out until after—just awful sick."

"You shore know how to be sick," grinned Cowan. "Do you feel like some eats?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"Better not talk any more, pardner. You've been pretty sick, and it might fever yuh up, if yuh talked much."

That suited the sheriff. He didn't want to talk; he wanted to think. His eyes shifted to his belt and gun on the bunk-post at the head of his bed, and he wondered if the gun was loaded.

When Cowan went outside he lifted a hand toward the gun, and as he did so he glanced at his hand. He felt of his stubby face, and a look of horror spread over his face.

"Smallpox!" he exclaimed to himself. "That's what it is—all them little red specks. I got it from that damn' hobo!"

COWAN came back into the house, but the sheriff did not tell him. He was afraid that Cowan might leave him in fear of the disease. Not exactly that he felt an immediate need of Cowan, but he wanted to take Cowan back a prisoner.

"Still feelin' pretty good?" asked Cowan as he busied himself around the stove.

"I don't feel so good, Cowan."

"Probably not. Can't expect to. But I reckon I've busted the fever. How about a little broth, eh?"

"Not now."

"Uh-huh. Tomorrow mornin', if yo're feeling pretty good, I think I'll head for Mesquite River and send some folks in to take care of yuh. You need a doctor pretty bad, and you'll need the right kinda food."

That was not so good. The sheriff huddled down in bed, trying to think of some way to prevent Cowan from leaving. Just now his thoughts ran in circles, because his head ached again. Ten minutes later he was delirious again.

And all that night Cowan had to use force to keep him in bed. He babbled of murderers, horse thieves and of his own prowess as a sheriff. And in the light of the candle Cowan saw the rash on the sheriff's hands and face.

"Smallpox!" grunted Cowan. "So that's what's the matter, eh? Lucky I've had a good dose of it. Tomorrow I'll tie him down and head for a doctor."

It was daylight again before the sheriff became conscious. The fever had abated enough to allow him to realize and recognize again. Cowan's face was drawn and tired, his eyes red from lack of sleep.

"Sane again, eh?" he grunted. "Well, you've shore been off yore nut a-plenty, pardner. Listen to me and get this straight. I'm goin' out and round up my bronc. You've got a sweet case of smallpox, which means yo're goin' to be here mebbe a couple weeks. I can't stay all that time; so I'm headin' for Mesquite River to get yuh a doctor and a nurse.

"Yuh take her easy while I get my horse. Mebbe I better tie yuh down, 'cause you might go wanderin' around and die out in the desert. Anyway, yo're all right for a while, and I'll see yuh before I pull out. I'll leave plenty water, such as it is, where yuh can reach it. But you've got to have plenty nursin' and the right kinda food."

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Red Cowan picked up his rope and went out, leaving the sheriff staring at the rafters, trying to force his mind to function properly. He didn't want Red Cowan to leave him. He had never failed to bring in his man, and if Red Cowan ever left that ranch——

HIS hand reached up weakly and drew the heavy Colt from the holster. It was fully loaded. The weight of it quickly tired his wrist, and he stared at his bloodless hand. The fever had sapped his strength badly, and he lay back wearily, cursing himself for a quitter.

He was no match for Red Cowan now. Hadn't Cowan said something about tying him down? The sheriff tried to sit up. If Red Cowan tied him down——

"Get up, you fool!" he told himself. "Yo're all right. Are you goin' to lie here and let a murderer escape. You are Duty Deming, sheriff of Calor."

With a superhuman effort he managed to swing around on the bunk and get his feet over the edge; but toppled back, where he lay breathing heavily, gripping the gun in his right hand.

He could feel the fever coming back, but he would not let that stop him. It was now or never. No thought of the future—only the present. The law must be served.

He managed to reach the doorway, where he went to his knees, blinking out at the sunlight. It dazzled his eyes, until the tears ran down his cheeks, and he dropped his head to one knee, covering his eyes with his arm.

"No other gods before Me," he muttered. "What did she mean? What would rise up and kill me?"

His fumbling fingers tried to locate his star, not realizing that he wore nothing but his underclothes. He laughed foolishly in the crook of his elbow. His mind was clouding again.

"I can't die," he told himself. "It's my duty to live. I've got to live!"

He got slowly to his feet, fighting hard.

"They'll hang him—hang Red Cowan. Eye for an eye. The law demands that. I'm the law of Calor, ain't I? Don't the law demand his life?"

The sheriff sagged wearily, gripping the side of the door with his left hand.

"I'm the law," he muttered drunkenly. "I demand——"

The fever cloud was enveloping him again, and the little blue devils with their sledges were beating on his brain, trying to batter him into insensibility.

WHERE was Red Cowan, he wondered? Where had he gone? He was obliged to use both hands to cock the Colt. Red Cowan. That was what he wanted. The man with the flame-colored hair. There was no gratitude for what Red had done for him. No thought of the days and nights of nursing. The law must be satisfied, and Duty Deming was the law.

He went stumbling across the uneven ground, sagging at the knees, his head swinging from side to side, almost trailing the cocked revolver in his right hand; fighting, fighting all the while.

Then he saw his quarry just at the corner of the old stable. It was Red Cowan, looking at him. The big Colt swung up and his finger tightened on the trigger. The recoil jerked the gun from his hands and he almost fell.

He did not look for the gun. One shot had been enough. He hunched one shoulder against the old stable wall, gasping for breath. The law had been satisfied. He closed his eyes for a moment. The devils were still hammering on his brain, but above it all he could hear another sound; a thump, thump, thump of horses walking.

Slowly he opened his eyes and tried to see what the blurred thing was. He knew it was a man on a horse, although his eyes did not register the figures.

"Jim Deming!" said a voice. "For God's sake, Jim!"

It was Joe Mills, the ex-deputy.

"Don't yuh know me, Jim?" he asked. "This is Joe Mills."

"I know," whispered Deming. "Yuh quit me."

"Aw, forget that. We've been huntin' all over the country for you, Jim; and I——"

"I had to do my duty," whispered Deming. He lifted his right hand with a supreme effort and pointed a finger waveringly.

"That's Red Cowan," he said.

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"Yo're crazy!" blurted the deputy. "That ain't Red Cowan."

For several moments the sheriff did not move. His face twisted strangely. "You say that ain't Red Cowan?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Of course not, you danged fool."

"Don't lie to me, Joe! My God, don't lie."

"I ain't lyin', Jim. Yo're crazy, I tell yuh. Of course this ain't Red Cowan. I know Red."

For a moment the sheriff's head sagged heavily, but he swung himself away from the stable, started toward the house on uncertain legs, but collapsed, falling flat on his face.

"Now, wouldn't that rasp yuh!" snorted the deputy, as he swung off his horse and walked over to the prostrate sheriff. He picked him up and took him to the shade, where he laid him on the ground.

Something about the sheriff caused the deputy to make a quick examination.

"I'll be totally darned!" he said slowly.

Then he turned his head and saw Red Cowan, riding in from beyond the stable; riding a bareback horse and leading another.

"Hello, Mills!" yelled Cowan. "Where'd you come from?"

"C'mere," said the ex-deputy, and Cowan rode up to him.

"By golly, I thought I should have tied him down," said Cowan.

"He's dead," said Mills slowly.

"Dead? Whatcha know about that? I found him several nights ago, plumb flat over there in the lava beds. He was too sick to talk; so I brought him here. I've had one hell of a time, nursin' him, Joe. Got smallpox, I reckon."

"Measles," said Joe. "Must 'a' got 'em from a hobo he had in jail at Calor. Hobo almost died, too. Didn't Deming tell yuh what he was doin' in the lava beds?"

"Too sick, I guess."

"He was lookin' for you, Red. Wanted yuh for the murder of Mitchell."

"What?"

"Fact. Delong brought the news of it, and Deming started on yore trail. But Delong got throwed against a hitchrack post that mornin', and it hurt him so bad he died that same afternoon. But before he died he confessed to murderin' old Mitchell himself. He just thought he'd put the deadwood on you, 'cause you quarreled with Mitchell before yuh quit."

RED COWAN laughed shortly. "So that was it, eh? Deming didn't mention it to me. Mebbe he was too sick."

"Prob'ly. Too bad he didn't live longer, Red. Delong confessed that Mitchell hired him to plant evidence that sent Harry Deming to the pen. We'll have Harry out in a few days."

"Well, I'll be danged!"

"Queer, ain't it?" mused Joe, looking down at the body of the sheriff. "His wife said that some day his star would rise up and kill him. She said he was makin' a god out of his star. I dunno, Red. Things have a queer way of workin' out. If he hadn't been so strong on duty he'd never have taken that sick hobo off that train. Deming always had the idea of bein' his brother's keeper, yuh know."

"That's what I've heard. Duty they called him, didn't they?"

"Yeah. Awful set in his ways. I suppose we might as well start back with him."

"Sure; might as well. Sorry I didn't rope him down. But he seemed to be all right when I left. Fever made his heart weak, I suppose. But he never told me he was after me, Joe."

"He wouldn't. I can figure out where he got the measles and I can figure out why he didn't tell yuh what he was doin' in the lava beds, but I'll be damned if I can figure out why he killed the red bull calf and said it was you."

"I didn't know about that, Joe. He must have been crazy."

"Mm-m-m-m," sai Joe slowly. "I s'pose he was. Red, do yuh believe in them Ten Commandments?"

"Never read any of 'em. What are they about?"

"Everythin'."

"Must be good, eh?"

"Worth readin'. Git a rope and we'll take him home."

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ALL KINDS O' COPS

By LEMUEL DeBRA

Author of "Chief Kane Takes a Hand," "The Blood Print," etc.

NEW SCIENTIFIC METHODS OF CRIMINAL DETECTION ARE ALL RIGHT, BUT AFTER THE MYSTERY CONCERNING A SERIES OF BOX-CAR ROBBERIES HAD BEEN CLEARED UP, IT SEEMED FAIRLY PLAIN THAT FOR ALL KINDS OF CASES YOU MUST HAVE ALL KINDS OF COPS

NEVER before in the eight years that Detective Ed Cartwright had been connected with the Riverside police department had he thought of writing any such document as he was laboriously composing this morning. A man who usually solved his problems by bull-headedly smashing his way through them, Cartwright was becoming furious at his inability to finish this letter which, at most, did not need to contain more than a dozen simple words. With sudden disgust, he seized his sixth attempt in his big hands and tore it to shreds. He was hurling the paper at the waste-basket when he heard a cry down the street: "Extra! Extra! All about the big robbery!"

Detective Cartwright looked around. He had stepped into the library because he wanted to be undisturbed while he composed his letter. Not sure that the boy would come in with his papers, Cartwright arose and hastened out to the steps, put two fingers to his lips and whistled. A moment later he was back at the writing desk reading a front page story in an extra edition of the Riverside Morning *News*.

ANOTHER BOX-CAR ROBBERY
$60,000 WORTH OF SILKS STOLEN
Eighth Case in as Many Months Baffles Police
Two Watchmen Slightly Injured

Slowly, Detective Cartwright struggled through the account. It was the same old story.

Five bandits, dressed exactly alike—dark suits, dark caps, and black masks—had quietly surrounded the warehouse of the Riverside Importation Company, overpowered the two nightwatchmen, broken into a sealed car and stolen fifty-five bales of raw silk. How they had arrived on the scene, and how they got away, no one knew. Neither of the watchmen had heard a car arrive or leave.

Each of the five bandits wore gloves and carried an automatic pistol. All during the robbery not one of them spoke a word. The one who was apparently the leader gave his orders by means of hand signals. From what little the watchmen could tell the police, speed, precision, and careful planning marked every move the bandits made.

"Huh!" grunted Detective Cartwright as he flung the paper aside. "Nothin' in my young life—any more!" Then, as if reading about the robbery had cleared his mind, he dashed off his letter, blotted it, shoved it in a plain envelope, and put the envelope

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in his inside coat pocket. Outside on the library steps he clamped his jaws over a big cigar, lighted it, and struck out for the police station.

ARRIVED at the station Cartwright, from force of habit, glanced up at the clock. It was nine-thirty. For the first time in his eight years of service he was late reporting for duty. Well, it didn't matter—now. He started to turn in at the main office, then passed on down the corridor to the assembly room. There were papers and other things in his desk he would want.

As Cartwright flung open the door and strode into the assembly room, Eckhart, of the homicide squad, looked up from a report he was writing. He jerked the cigar from his lips.

"Where'n'ell you been all mornin', Ed? The chief wants you. Been phonin' all over town."

Cartwright scowled. He had worked with Detective Eckhart on many cases. The two were about the same age—in the early thirties—and were close friends.

"I been expectin' it, Eckhart," said Cartwright bitterly. "Ever since that Woodstock suicide case when I made a fool o' myself an' the old chief covered his gray head with glory, I've been expectin' to get the gate. I don't fit in with all this new fangled science stuff. I can't look through a microscope at a piece of hair an' tell that the owner of the hair had brown eyes an' bunions an' never paid his laundry bills. No, I'm just an old fashioned roughneck bull!"

Eckhart stared. Again he jerked the cigar from his mouth; but before he could speak, the door of the reception office was thrown open and Chief Kane, himself, looked in. "Hey, Ed!" he called out with surprise tinged with impatience. "I want to see you. Right away, please!"

Rebellion surged up in Cartwright's heart, but the habit of years was strong within him. "Yes, Chief," he answered, saluting, and followed Kane into the chief's private office.

"Where on earth have you been, Ed?" began Chief Kane. "Do you know you're over an hour late?"

Detective Cartwright dropped heavily into a chair. He poked stubby fingers through his mop of unruly black hair while anger kindled in his dark eyes.

"I been at the library, Mr. Kane. I was——"

"The library! *You*—at the library?"

Cartwright flushed. "Yes, sir!" he snapped. He reached for the envelope in his inside coat pocket. "I got a personal matter to take up with you that——"

"Let it wait!" Chief Kane cut in with a harshness that surprised Cartwright. "You read about that box-car robbery this morning?"

Cartwright nodded.

"Know much about those robberies, Ed?"

"Only what I've read in the papers. I haven't worked on 'em——"

"I know." Chief Kane's lips curled with sarcasm. "For eight months every phase of the box-car robberies has been investigated *scientifically*. Every means known to modern scientific crime detection has been employed. The microanalyst has given me me a ten-page report on what he learned about the bandits from a few grains of sawdust he found in a footprint. Jerry Maloy has given me about fifty names of crooks who might be in the gang—because they use gloves and don't leave fingerprints. Photographers have given me enough pictures of the 'scene of the crimes' to fill a gallery. The chemist with his Duboscq colorimeter has given me a lengthy and learned analysis of a speck of blood found on a broken car seal about two months ago. But *nobody brings in the bandits!*"

DETECTIVE CARTWRIGHT did not know what to say. His black eyes snapping eagerly, he waited for the chief to proceed.

"Ed," said Kane abruptly, "I'm putting you on this case. Handle it your own way. Here's a stack of reports a foot high, but I don't want you to even look at them. This science stuff is all right, but now I want *action!* You understand?"

"Yes, Chief," mumbled Cartwright, too surprised to say more.

"Want any help?"

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Cartwright answered promptly. "I would like to have just one man; Detective Raiford, sir."

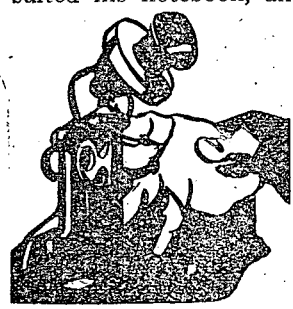
Kane smiled. He pressed a button. Day desk sergeant Joe Munson stuck his head in the door.

"Get Roughhouse Raiford!" ordered Kane. "Get him at once. Tell him to drop whatever he's working on and——" Kane hesitated and looked around at Cartwright.

"An' meet me at my hotel," finished Cartwright, rising.

Munson saluted and closed the door. "One thing more," Chief Kane said. "I'm not expecting you to do the impossible. I'm not forgetting that some mighty good men have worked on this case and flunked. Wickham, for example. Got a force trained to work on railroad cases and with nothing else to do. Got the Riverside Valley Railroad backing him, of course. He has done some good work. Has recovered part of the loot of previous robberies, but he hasn't got the bandits. You may fall down, too. If you do, I won't hold it against you. But—" Kane slapped the stack of papers on his desk—"if you send me in a neatly typed report full of theory and excuses, *I'll have you fired!* Hop to it!"

Detective Cartwright turned and left by the door that opened directly on to the corridor. There he turned to a phone, consulted his notebook, and called a number.



"Listen to me," he said when a sleepy voice answered. "This is Cartwright. Yeah, Cartwright, of the detective bureau. I'll be at my hotel in ten minutes. An' I want to see you. Get me? No, don't try that on me. No, I said *ten minutes!* What's that? Work? Well, if I have to come after you you won't be able to work for a week. Yeah, same room. Snappy, now!"

Cartwright hung up. Flinging the mangled stump of his cigar at a cuspidor, he hastened down the steps, bought another paper, and swung aboard a street-car. This time he studied the account of the robbery with real interest. The last few paragraphs contained several items that started Cartwright frowning thoughtfully.

The warehouse, itself, in which was a safe containing a small sum of money, was not entered.

George W. Wickham, special agent of the Riverside Valley Railroad, told a *News* reporter that the robbery was obviously the work of the same gang that committed the seven other box-car robberies in the past eight months. He said the fact that the car containing the silk had been set out scarcely two hours before the robbery, was proof that the bandits had been given an inside tip.

"My men are working on important clues," Wickham said. "I expect to make arrests within twenty-four hours."

Other than to admit that Wickham had asked him several months ago to help him catch the box-car bandits, Chief of Police Kane would make no comment on last night's robbery.

"Some job!" muttered Cartwright as he alighted from the car and hastened into his hotel. "No wonder the chief expects me to flunk!"

HE GOT his key, told the clerk to send up the two visitors he expected, and skipped up the one flight of stairs to his room. The room had not yet been made up, but Cartwright never noticed such things. He began taking clothing from a closet and tossing it on to the bed. Last of all, he dug an old pair of shoes out of a dark corner. He had changed into "rough" when he heard a hesitant knock on the door. Slipping his police .38 into his shoulder holster, and his handcuffs into his pocket, Cartwright strode to the door and flung it open.

Into the room glided furtively a white-faced man with close-clipped hair. He was shabbily dressed, and clutched a cheap cap in his nervous hands.

"'Lo, Dorn," said Cartwright quietly closing the door. "Set down! I'm goin' to ask a few questions an' I want straight answers. Understand?"

Dorn perched himself on the edge of the bed. Gulping nervously, he nodded his

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head. He knew Cartwright had nothing on him; but he also knew Cartwright's methods. Every crook in Riverside County knew just what to expect from Bull Cartwright and his side-kick, Roughhouse Raiford. They were square-shooters; they never framed a guy; but they certainly got what they went after.

Cartwright got out a cigar, tore off the end with his teeth, and struck a match with his big thumbnail. Over the flame, he studied the ex-convict's face. Dorn was in a position to know the secret whisperings of the underworld. He could tell Cartwright in five minutes what it would take five weeks of careful investigation to uncover. The fact that the reform press was constantly hammering the police for hounding ex-convicts never bothered Cartwright. He knew that nine out of ten crimes were committed by ex-convicts and jail-birds.

"Dorn, if you lie to me I'll beat hell out o' you," began Cartwright in his gruff, nervous manner. "I guess you know that! An' I ain't got no time to waste beatin' around the bush. Where was you this mornin' at three o'clock, an' what do you know about these box-car robberies?"

The ex-convict showed no surprise. He glanced furtively at the door, then turned to the officer and spoke in jerky, hurried sentences.

"Honest to Gawd, I don't know a thing about 'em, Mr. Cartwright! Not a thing, s'help me! I was at the Greek's last night until one; then I hit the hay. But listen! You remember Shack Shinborn? Done a two year stretch for robbin' a box-car over at Water Junction? He blew in town the other night. He says this is a new mob. He says none o' the boys knows who they are. An' I think he's right. They ain't no new birds hangin' around spendin' coin. An' none o' the old crowd has got the brains to pull what that mob has been gettin' away with."

CARTWRIGHT smoked over that a minute. He was about to ask another question when some one rapped sharply on the door, then shoved the door open. Roughhouse Raiford, a stocky man with big, freckled hands and a broken nose, crowded into the room. He gave the ex-convict a hard stare, then turned to Cartwright.

"Listen to me, Dorn!" growled Cartwright. "You ain't half as smart as you think you are! I'm goin' to let you go now; but if you say one word to Shack Shinborn *I'll* break your damn' neck! Now blow!"

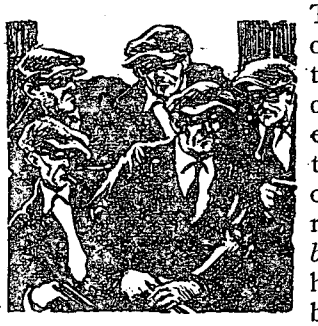
The ex-convict made a dive for the door, and was gone.

"Shack Shinborn!" muttered Detective Raiford. "Didn't know that dirty little crook was in town! If you want him——"

"I don't!" Cartwright broke in. "Just givin' Dorn a stall. What Dorn told me backs up a hunch I already had, but I didn't want him to know it. This new bunch o' scientific dicks is always raggin' me about my hunches. They say that instead o' weighin' the evidence an' arrivin' at a conclusion, I jump at a conclusion an' then try to make the evidence prove it. Well, they can say what they damn' please. I've *jumped at a conclusion.* It's a helluva jump, an' I may get an awful fall. But—say, you read this?" He shoved the paper at Raiford. "Don't matter! Read it again!"

Slowly, and half aloud, Roughhouse Raiford read the account of the robbery.

"Now," Cartwright spoke through a cloud of smoke, "what are the *plain facts?*



There's a gang o' crooks well trained an' well organized. In eight months they've pulled off eight box-car robberies. *Why box-cars?* One half way decent bank robbery would give 'em a richer haul than the whole damn' eight box-car jobs they've pulled. Answer: They're stickin' to box-cars for two reasons. First, they get inside tips; second, *they're playin' safe!*"

Roughhouse Raiford stared, astounded and incredulous. "Ed!" he gasped finally. "Are you accusin' my friend George Wickham?"

"By hell!" Cartwright looked up, dismayed. "I clean forgot that you an' Wick-

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ham were pretty close. Offered you a job on his force once, didn't he? Well, I can't help it. You know me. I don't trust nobody. Of course, I have to trust you; but don't forget I'm watchin' you!"

"Watch an' be damned!" grinned Raiford. "But when you suspect Wickham, you're crazy. He's been workin' day an' night on that case. An' did you know he had recovered part o' the loot o' several robberies?"

"Just a stall!" growled Cartwright.

"Stall hell! Say, listen—if Wickham was protectin' them birds, do you s'pose he'd 'a' asked the chief to help him round 'em up?"

"Another stall," muttered Cartwright doggedly.

Raiford raised a freckled paw to rub his broken nose. "I say you're crazy," he growled; "but dammit, I know better'n to try to pound any sense into your solid ivory dome! Besides, I'm takin' orders from you. What are they? Want me to pinch Wickham?" he asked sarcastically.

Cartwright took a long draw on his cigar. Suddenly he snatched the cigar from his lips, hurled it at the cuspidor, and sprang to his feet. He began pulling off his wool shirt.

"I was goin' to begin at the bottom," Cartwright said. "Down on Water Street. But Dorn told me a helluva lot while he thought he was merely convincin' me that he knew nothing. So now I'm goin' to change my plans. I'm goin' to begin at the top. I'm goin' to see George Wickham!"

Roughhouse Raiford scowled, but made no comment. The two men understood each other pretty well and neither spoke again until they were in the third-floor hall of the Arcade Building near Wickham's offices.

"I know George Wickham an' all of his four men by sight," Cartwright said quietly; "but that's about all I do know. Give me the dope on this bird before I go in there."

RAIFORD hesitated. "Well," he began with obvious reluctance, "George has been special agent for about a year an' he——"

"An' in that year there's been eight box-car robberies! I know that. Go back farther. Who is he? Where'd he come from?"

"We—l—l, his dad is some bugs in railroad circles in Chicago, I understand. He an' George don't hitch. Started when George got in a scrape in college an' got kicked out. Pull landed him with the Department of Justice but couldn't keep him there. When the old man got him this job he told him it was his last chance, so George——"

"Is makin' hay while the sun shines, eh?" grinned Cartwright. "Listen, Roughhouse. You see the arrangement o' Wickham's offices—reception office in center; assembly room for his agents on the right; Wickham's private office on the left. That's where I'll be. You plant yourself by Wickham's door. When I leave, you get an earful. Understand?"

Raiford, still scowling, nodded impatiently. Cartwright strode down the hall and into the reception office. A girl sitting at a typewriter desk reading a magazine looked up indifferently. "Dumbdora!" Cartwright told himself. "She knows nothing." Aloud, he said, "I'm Cartwright, from detective headquarters. Want to see Wickham!"

With one eye still on her magazine, the girl reached for the desk phone and took off the receiver. Casually, Cartwright walked to the door marked "Private" and stood with one ear close to the crack. The girl gave Cartwright's message. There was a mumbled answer. "He'll see you in a minute," the girl said, and went on with her reading. Inside Wickham's office were voices too low for Cartwright to understand; then heavy steps crossed the floor, the hall door was opened—and closed.

Detective Cartwright stepped away from the private door. "Some one just went out," he said. "One of Wickham's men, I s'pose."

"I'm sure I couldn't say," the girl murmured into her magazine. "Mr. Wickham will see you now."

"Huh!" muttered Cartwright to himself. "Not so dumb—mebbe!"

Wickham met him at the door and greeted him effusively. Wickham was a man of slight build, a touch of sullen arro-

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gance in his eyes, a pale face, and a straw colored mustache that Cartwright described as snippy. He seated Cartwright, pushed a box of cigarettes across the desk and when Cartwright declined gruffly, lighted one himself. Obviously ill at ease, he waited for Cartwright to state his business.

"I'm on this here box-car case," Detective Cartwright began bluntly. "Startin' at the chalk-mark, eight months' handicap, an' goin' it blind. Of course, you don't want us cops to grab those birds—you might lose your job—but I'm goin' after 'em. See? Well, I ain't expectin' you to hand me any hot clues, but if there's anything you want to tell me—I'm listenin'."

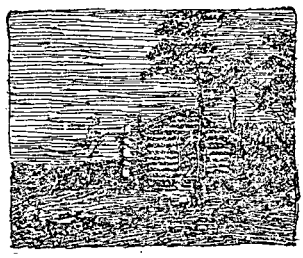
WICKHAM took a long draw on his cigarette, then crushed the stub in the ash-tray. He picked an ivory paper-cutter off the desk and began picking nervously at his immaculate and highly polished nails.

"I'll be glad to tell you anything you wish to know, Mr. Cartwright. In fact, I asked Chief Kane to give me all the help he could—six or seven months ago. His men seem to have dug up several valuable clues, but they haven't got the bandits—any more than my men have. We've been close to them several times. Recovered——"

"That's one thing I want," Cartwright interrupted. "Give me a list o' the stolen stuff—an' another list showin' just what you recovered, where you found it, an' who found it. See?"

Wickham shot the detective a startled look. "Why—why, certainly, Mr. Cartwright, you can have a list!" He opened a drawer and got out a typed sheet of paper. "Here's an extra copy. Take it along. You'll note that the eight robberies have netted the bandits close to half a million. The biggest haul was the first one—eighty-five thousand dollars worth of furs. We didn't get any of them back, nor any of that second lot—that batch of brushes, hand mirrors, perfumes, etc. On the fourth, sixth, and seventh cases we got back a total of twenty thousand dollars worth of stuff.

"I'll tell you frankly what I think of this," Wickham went on while Cartwright appeared to be studying the list. "The men in this gang don't hang around Riverside. They get an inside tip—where, I haven't the slightest idea. They slip in town after night, pull the job, and slip out. Working on that theory, my men, on three occasions,



have almost caught the bandits. Once they trailed them to the old De Martini Villa; once to an abandoned farmhouse five miles down the river; and once to a woods-camp just beyond Red Rapids bridge. The bandits got away each time, but my men were so hot on their trail they had to leave part of the loot.

"So, while I say I'm glad to have your help, I really think there is nothing you can do. I believe we have the gang located; but I don't care, just yet, to name the city. It is only a matter of hours until we will be ready to make arrests. But until then—well, I'm sure you'd prefer to work along your own lines anyway."

"Yeah, that's right," murmured the detective. There was an absent-minded look on his face as he folded the paper and shoved it in a pocket. "Well, don't do no harm for me to look around. Mebbe I'll see if them two nightwatchmen know anything."

"They don't!" declared Wickham emphatically. "Both middle-aged men; been in the employ of the Riverside Importation Company for years. And both were pretty badly bruised by the bandits. No, we couldn't fasten a thing on them. Still, you might try."

CARTWRIGHT arose. "Of course, you knowed that lot o' silk was comin?"

"Yes, I was notified," replied Wickham with obvious reluctance. "The local freight agent of the Riverside Valley Railroad telephoned me personally yesterday afternoon that the car containing the silk would be switched off at the warehouse of the Riverside Importation Company at one

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o'clock this morning. I talked the matter over with Durkfield, my chief field agent, and we decided that owing to the consignees having two experienced nightwatchmen on the job, we didn't need to worry about the matter. We can't watch every car that is switched off here."

"Of course not." Detective Cartwright got out a cigar, very carefully bit off the end, and began fumbling for a match. "I suppose the Riverside Importation Company knew just when the car would arrive?"

"Yes. And the watchmen were informed. If you're trying to find out where the leak is, you'll learn it could be quite a number of places. And there certainly was a leak! I don't know just what else was in that car, but evidently it was stuff too bulky or of too little value for the bandits to want. And fifty-five bales of raw silk! They had to be prepared to haul that stuff away! Yet those two watchmen declare they did not hear a motor car either before or after the robbery!"

Cartwright struck a match and lighted his cigar, turning it around and around his big fingers. "I ain't much on that deep stuff," he rumbled through a cloud of smoke. "An' it looks to me like you're doin' all that can be expected under the circumstances. I'll putter along in my own way, but I don't see much chance o' makin' a record on this case," he finished, grinning. "Well, so long!"

"Good-by—and good luck!" Wickham called after him.

CARTWRIGHT left by way of the hall door. As he closed the door behind him, he signalled to Roughhouse Raiford, who promptly—and noisily—strode off down the corridor. Cartwright, standing where his shadow would not fall on the glass, put his ear close to Wickham's door. He was elated to hear Wickham's muffled voice.

"Market Five One, please——Durkfield?—Say, Henry, you guessed it. Kane has put Cartwright on the job——No, of course, I didn't spill anything. I gave him a stall about having the gang located in another city—— No, I'm not sure that he swallowed the story. He's not as dumb as he looks. And we must do something. I can't stand this worry any longer—— No, don't come back here. Come to my room tonight— Say, eight o'clock—all right, I'll——"

With more haste than grace, Cartwright skipped down the corridor. He took the elevator, and joined Raiford in the lower hall. "C'mon, Roughhouse," he said quietly. "On our way to the phone office. Say, that bird who came out o' Wickham's office just after I went in; Henry Durkfield, wasn't it?"

"Yeah; an' you ought 'a' seen the look he give me. I'd like to pin something on that bozo."

"Well, don't get excited. We haven't been on this case an hour yet. Say, you know Wickham's stenog an' phone girl?"

"Sure, that's Durkfield's wife. Didn't try to flirt with her, did you?"

"Durkfield's wife!" Cartwright missed a step, then walked on, frowning. He did not speak again until they were opposite the telephone exchange. There he drew Raiford into a deserted stairway.

"Roughhouse," he said quietly, "there's goin' to be hell poppin' on this case before tomorrow this time. My hunch is workin' out an' I'm seein' things I can't explain to you yet. So I want to say this to you right now. This case means a lot to me, a hell-uva lot more than you got the brains to understand. Just the same, I'm goin' to do for you exactly what you'd do for me, an' that's this: if you want to save your friend George Wickham, you better tip him off right now."

RAIFORD stared; then he grinned. "I know just how you mean that, old side-kick! An' I sure would do the same for you. Also I'm goin' to give you the same damn' answer you'd give me. An' that's this: if George Wickham is crooked —*he ain't my friend!*"

"I knowed it!" grinned Cartwright. "Now listen, ol' timer! We can't do much before eight o'clock tonight. Got to find out where Wickham lives, where Durkfield hangs out, an' so forth. So you wait while I hop over to the 'phone office an' get the low-down on Market Five One. That's where Wickham phoned Durkfield

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; soon as I got out o' the office. Probably on't mean a thing; but you an' me bein' umbbells, we can't take no chances o' assin' up a hot clue."

Unhurriedly, Cartwright crossed the reet and entered the telephone office. gnoring a sign *"Private—No Admit-nce"* he flung open a gate and strode up here a middle-aged man was seated at a esk dictating to a stenographer. "'Lo, om," the detective spoke casually; "gim-e the dope on this number." He scrib-ed the number on a sheet of paper.

The man at the desk nodded to the enographer, who picked up her book and ft. "I'll have this in a minute, Ed," he old the detective. "Sit down." He picked p a desk phone. A moment later Cart-right was writing:

NATIONAL NOVELTY COMPANY
422 Railroad Ave.
J. W. Malford, Proprietor

"Never heard of 'em!" muttered Cart-right. He repeated the address aloud. Say, Tom, find out when that phone was nstalled!"

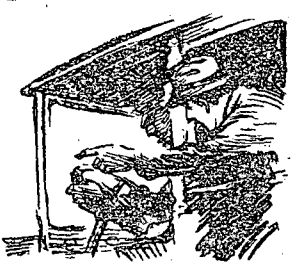
When that report came, Cartwright sat own. He reached for a cigar, then hanged his mind. "Tom, gimme a private ne. Quick! An' get Joe Williams over t the *Wholesaler's Monthly!*"

The man at the desk reached for another hone. The call was put through.

"Hey, Joe, this is Ed Cartwright," the etective spoke quietly. "Yeah, the big ick—that's right. Listen, Joe! I want you o do something. There's a new concern own at 422 Railroad Avenue. Had a hone installed a little over eight months go. Gimme the low-down on that bunch —an' make it snappy."

"That's easy," the answer came over the vire. "No one knows much about them. Don't do any local business. Ship stuff to ountry towns and to New York, but not ery busy at that. Man named Malford is upposed to be the head of the concern, ut no one has ever seen him. They haven't oined the local association. He has three mployees. No one knows where Malford nd his men came from. Still, I don't know thing against the outfit—except that they on't advertise in my paper."

"I don't blame them!" chuckled Cart-wright. He mumbled his thanks, and hung up. He got out a cigar, but forgot to light it. For a moment he sat motionless, staring at the phone; then he jumped up, flung a gruff "Thanks!" over his shoulder, and left. Across the street, he found Railford gone. He waited a few minutes, scowling, then hailed a taxi and drove to the ware-



house of the Riverside Importation Company. This, as he had figured out from the number, was less than a block down the railroad from the warehouse of the National Novelty Company. Lighting his cigar, Detective Cartwright strolled down the track.

HE WAS almost past No. 422 before he saw the number over the shipping door. There was no sign giving the firm name, and all the doors were closed. The green shades over the two big windows were up too far from the lower sash to allow a view of the interior.

Cartwright strolled on half a block, and came back. There was nothing about the warehouse and offices of the National Novelty Company to arouse suspicion. A passing merchant or salesman might conclude that business was dull. That was all. Without another glance at the place, Cartwright hastened on, turned down the first corner and doubled back through the alley. Just as he saw the number 422, and had concluded from the dusty and cobwebbed windows that this end of the warehouse was not in use, a door opened and a man stepped out, closing the door quickly behind him. He wore overalls, a work-shirt, and a cap. He glanced up and down the alley, saw Cartwright, and struck off in the opposite direction.

"Hey, you!" Detective Cartwright called, hurrying forward. The man stopped and turned, frowning impatiently. His features were sharp; his eyes hard, calculating. To himself, Cartwright said, "If this bird is an honest workingman, I'm a manufacturer o' crocheted bathtubs!" To

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the man, he said aloud, "You work in there?"

"Yes," the man replied shortly. He took out a watch and looked at it significantly.

"Where you goin' in such a hurry?" asked Cartwright, showing his badge.

The man looked at the badge, glanced quickly back at the door he had just left, then met Cartwright's gaze. "I'm on my way to lunch. You looking for some one around here?"

"Yeah!" snapped Cartwright, and grabbed the man by the arm. "I'm lookin' for you. An' you ain't goin' to lunch!" He searched him quickly, finding him unarmed.

The man offered no resistance. "You mean you're arresting me!" he exclaimed. "You can't do that without a warrant."

"The hell I can't! Say, for an honest workin' man you know too damn' much law. Now you can take your choice; walk with me to the station, or be hauled to the hospital!"

The man took one more look at the detective. "I'll walk," he said. "I have nothing to fear. And you'll not be so cocky when my lawyer gets through with you!"

"Yeah!" snarled Cartwright. "I sure would like to meet your lawyer. Who's payin' him? Durkfield?"

"Durkfield? Who's he?"

"You're goin' to find out he's no friend o' yours!" Cartwright snapped.

THE man started sharply, but quickly recovered. "Of course he isn't," he said. "I don't even know him. And I don't like your methods! What right have you to molest a citizen going about his duty? What right——"

"Aw, shut up!" Cartwright ordered savagely. "You make me sick. I've read all that junk a dozen times in the *News!*"

The prisoner subsided. Arrived at the station, Cartwright proceeded upstairs to the Bureau of Identification. Detective Sergeant Jerry Maloy, in charge of the bureau, got busy at once. Somewhat to Cartwright's surprise, the prisoner offered no objection to being fingerprinted or photographed, nor when taken downstairs to a cell.

Fifteen minutes later, Cartwright had Jerry's report. The prisoner was unknown. "No previous record," Jerry stated emphatically. "Ed, you oughta be more careful makin' arrests on suspicion!"

"Yeath?" Cartwright grinned sarcastically. "Well, I'll go right down an' beg his pardon."

"Ed! You ain't goin' to——"

"Aw, shut up! I'm handlin' this case—*my own way*. See?" He strode out, leaving Jerry shaking his head.

In the hall, Cartwright was surprised to meet Raiford. "Heard you were up here, Ed!" Roughhouse exclaimed. "Say, you know it was something big or I wouldn't 'a' skipped out on you. Well, it was. Nothin' but George Wickham hot-footin' it down the street. I tailed him—an' where do you s'pose he went? Straight to Chief Kane's office! Been all this time tryin' to get the chief to pull you off. An' Ed, the chief has done it!"

"Pulled us off'n this case?"

"Nothin' but. Seems that Wickham had some pull with the Commish and had him phone the chief while Wickham was there. The chief told me to tell you about it and for you to report to him for further orders."

Detective Cartwright stood motionless for a moment, staring at his working partner; then his big hands began fumbling for a cigar. Finding he had none left, he picked one out of Raiford's vest pocket.

"See here, Roughhouse," he spoke quietly, "orders are orders! I don't want to get you into trouble with the chief, so I'll take all the blame for this. What I mean is—*you ain't seen me an' you ain't said nothin'.*"

With that, Cartwright started on, but Raiford caught his arm. "Not so damn' fast, old side kick. What *I* mean is—I ain't goin' to see you or say nothin', but by hell I'm goin' to stick to you."

"Fine," ejaculated Cartwright, grinning. "Got a little job on, an' you're just the man I

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want. Here's where a coupla old-fashioned dumbbell, roughneck, hardboiled dicks do their stuff!"

"But we'd better go easy," cautioned Detective Raiford as they started downstairs; "the reformers are raisin' hell about this third degree stuff. More upset over that than they are over organized crime."

"Huh!" grunted Cartwright. "That's because no thug ever rapped them over the head an' swiped their dough. When that happens to them, they'll change their tune. An' you don't hear the crooks bellyachin' about the third degree, do you? They know it's only a mild dose o' what they're always givin' honest citizens. That's why I'm not thinkin' o' them reformers just now; I'm thinkin' o' them two old watchmen who got beat up while doin' their duty."

"Amen!" Raiford agreed. "There's a lot o' cases I could think of; but I don't dare. My control ain't none too good lately."

TWO hours later Detectives Cartwright and Raiford paused at the alley exit of the lower floor. Cartwright picked another cigar out of Raiford's pocket, sniffed at it—and put it back.

"Roughhouse," he said quietly, "we're in a helluva fix! I didn't get half as much outa that bird as I wanted. We got enough to back up my hunch, but not enough to back us in layin' the case before the chief—especially now that we're pulled off. We started this alone; let's wind it up alone."

"Suits me," Raiford agreed, and they hurried down the street, headed for Railroad Avenue, three blocks distant.

"In every mob," said Cartwright, "there's a weak sister. I figgered that bird was one when I picked him up. At that, he's clever—an' tough! An' did you notice that he shied at all our lies until I told that one about Mrs. Durkfield spillin' the beans?"

"Yes, but what I don't get is why he was so willin' then to squeal on Durkfield but wouldn't say a word about Wickham."

"Two answers to that, Roughhouse. Mebbe none o' the gang know of Wickham's connection; that is, none except Durkfield. Or—mebbe I'm wrong in my hunch about Wickham. Even if I am, my hunch sure started something, eh? Now Roughhouse, I want you to be careful. You better just stand guard at that back door. I'll go in the front way an' spring the glad news. You got a family, an' I ain't. No, don't argue, I'm givin' orders!"

They parted, Detective Raiford taking the alley and Detective Cartwright hurrying on to the front entrance on Railroad Avenue. As he turned the corner, Cartwright glanced at his watch. It was half past one.

The place looked just like Cartwright had seen it that morning. As he tried what appeared to be the main door, he wondered if the man he had arrested had been missed. Perhaps the rest of the gang had fled.

The door swung open. Cartwright strode in, closing the door behind him. He saw on his right a small railed-off office; on his left a jumble of old furniture, packing boxes, and other truck. Straight ahead was a door over which was a sign reading: "Warehouse—No Admittance."

THERE was no one in the office; but just as Detective Cartwright started forward, the warehouse door opened. Two men stepped into the room. Seeing Cartwright, they halted, stared for a split second, then whirled and leaped back through the doorway. As Cartwright made a dive for the door, it was slammed shut.

Cartwright did not hesitate. He knew a bullet might come splintering through that flimsy door, but such chances were all in a day's work. Hunching his shoulders, he hurled his weight at the door. There was a snapping of metal, the splintering of wood, a man's dismayed curse, another voice shouting excited orders—then he was stumbling headlong into a dimly lighted room and three dark figures were leaping upon him. Some heavy instrument grazed the side of his head, tore his ear, and almost paralyzed his left shoulder. A fist drove into his ribs, just as an out-thrust foot tripped him. As he went down, he heard a low-voiced order, *"Get him*—but be quiet!" It was Durkfield's voice.

Cartwright struck the floor on his face, turned quickly and drew up his legs. As his assailants sprang at him, he drove

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both feet into the nearest man's stomach, rolled over, caught a pair of legs and took them with him. As the owner of the legs crashed to the floor, Cartwright j[illegible] up. He drew his police .38 and handcuffs. "You're under arrest!" he shouted. "An' I'll kill the first man who moves!"

No one moved. The man on the floor lay on his side, apparently stunned. Another was huddled against the door. The third man was crouching by what Cartwright now discovered was a stairway. His eyes accustomed to the dim light, he saw that this man was Henry Durkfield. "Up with your mitts, Durkfield!" he ordered. "I don't trust you!"

Slowly Durkfield raised his hands. Watching him, Cartwright leaned over and snapped a cuff on the left wrist of the man on the floor. Turning this man over, he snapped the other cuff on the right wrist of the man huddled against the door. From each of these men he took an automatic. Tossing both guns against the wall behind him, he moved toward Durkfield.

At that instant, the man on the floor flung up his free hand and pulled Cartwright's gun arm. "Shoot him, Henry," he cried; "shoot him, quick!"

Savagely, Cartwright tore loose, but too late. Durkfield's arms dropped. From his right side came a stabbing flame. Simultaneous with the roar of the explosion, Cartwright felt the smashing impact of the bullet in his left shoulder. Hurled half way around, he fell across the man on the floor —just as Durkfield fired again.

Saved by the fall, Cartwright shouted for Durkfield to surrender; but Durkfield, with a curse, sprang forward, lowering his gun to fire at the fallen detective. Cartwright fired first. Durkfield's body stopped short, then pitched across the two men on the floor.

OUT of the rising roar in his ears, Cartwright heard the tramp of feet. That was the last he remembered.

Then—seeming to come from afar off but steadily growing nearer—he heard the familiar voice of autopsy surgeon, Doc Aaron: "He'll be all right in a few weeks. Young. Got lots of resistance. Vitality and——"

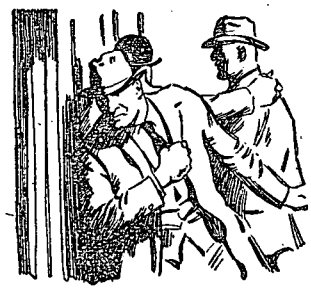
"Yeah," muttered Cartwright, "just a—hardboiled roughneck. Can't—kill me."

"Easy now, Ed!" cautioned Chief Kane. "Man, you've done enough to earn a few weeks lay-off—with pay. We've got the whole gang, thanks to you! And Mrs. Durkfield has told us——"

"Durkfield?" Cartwright's mind was clearing rapidly. "Is he——?"

"He'll live to stand trial," Kane told him. "You keep still and let me talk. Roughhouse Raiford nabbed one of the gang sneaking out that alley door. Then he heard the rumpus you were making, and blew his whistle. By the time we got there, you had laid out Durkfield and the two men.

"Seems that Durkfield had dropped in there just a few minutes before you and Raiford started your game. The gang told him they were worried over the absence of the bird you pinched. Durkfield immediately ordered one of the gang to telephone every place where the missing man might be found. Durkfield was in that back room when report was made to him that the man could not be located. He had just ordered a watch set at the alley door, and was sending the other two men out front, when you walked in. Something told them Bull Cartwright wasn't just dropping in for a friendly visit!



"Of course we've searched the warehouse. Found the masks, the fifty-five bales of silk, and a lot of other stolen stuff. They had some stuff in there they had bought, but what little legitimate business they did was just a blind.

"All four men were hard birds that Durkfield had picked up and organized into a tough gang. Not one of them had previous police records, but all of them were crooks. Durkfield was with them last night—when they hauled that silk down the track on trucks with gunny-sacks tied around the wheels; but usually he got the inside information and laid the plans. And he watched those men. He had all of them

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living quietly here in Riverside, acting just like respectable citizens while they were planning to extend their operations to other towns.

"By the way, Ed, you scared George Wickham this morning. Seems that the railroad officials have been hammering him for not getting the bandits, and he was afraid of losing his job. After you left, he telephoned Durkfield that something had to be done. Durkfield had been stringing him along by planting part of the loot and then 'recovering' it. I felt so sorry for Wickham that I promised him and Commissioner North that I'd hold you off the case a few days to give Wickham a chance to save his job. He's sure sick now after finding that Durkfield was crooked and that Mrs. Durkfield was just as bad. Raiford told me—ah! Here's Roughhouse now!"

Detective Raiford stepped to the bedside. He held out an envelope. "This dropped out o' your pocket when we put you on the stretcher. Want me to mail it for you, Ed?"

Detective Cartwright grinned. He reached out his good arm, took the letter, and opened it. Was it only this morning that he had struggled over the composition of this document? Holding it where Raiford and Kane could not see the words, he read:

To Chief of Police Kane,
And the Honorable Board of Commissioners.

Sirs:

I hereby tender my resignation as member of the detective bureau. Herewith my badge.

Respectfully,
—Signed— Ed Cartwright
Badge No. 8

Cartwright looked up at the old chief.

"Chief," he said, "this here science stuff, now; it's all right, an' we need it. But to handle all kinds o' cases, you gotta have all kinds o' cops. Eh?"

"Why, of course, Ed! What are you driving at?"

"Oh, nothin' particular, Chief, grinned Cartwright, as his big fist crumpled the letter.

In the Next Issue

A few mysterious doings along the Mexican Border

THE BROWN BOTTLE

by

Lemuel De Bra

There's not much missed by the men who ride the alkali trails

THE DESERT EYE

by **Ernest Haycox**

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BUYING TROUBLE

Holding A Six-Gun Heritage

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "Captain Cavalier," "The Timber Wolf," etc.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

CORNERED

THE best Tremaine could hope for was that in the dark there would be some loss of time before Captain Wire's men discovered that it had been a knife and not a bullet that had stricken one of them down. They would be in no haste to light a fire; their fingers could tell them little; it would require time to withdraw Crazy Jake's victim to some sheltered spot where they dared have a light. Meanwhile the one thing for Tremaine to do was put all possible distance between himself and this stretch of guarded territory.

His companion required little pressing. They hurried on, striking deeper into the hills. The rifle fire had ceased; all sounds died away behind them. They went down into a hollow, straight across it and into the mouth of a ravine. Again the islander led the way; there was a path here and he appeared to know every inch of the ground. From the crest of the next hill they caught a glint of light at some distance off to the right. Captain Wire's camp, doubtless, down by the shore.

It was Tremaine's purpose to continue northward until he was in the more wild and rugged lands, the broken slopes beneath the towering peaks. It should be easy there to find a spot where he could lie hidden, in the mouth of some large fissure or in a clump of bushes, and use his field glasses to some purpose upon Wire's camp. He meant to know if the trader, intrigued by the wild tale of a "pearl bird" was scurrying up and down, actually seeking its fabulous nest or, vastly more likely, if he had divers at work in the lagoon. What if there should turn out to be a rich bed of pearl oysters here? Whose, then, were they?

"Mine," muttered Tremaine, and trod on.

The glimmer of light was lost under

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a hill, glinted again through the still fingers of the palms, shining out more clearly than ever from the higher elevation. Near enough to have heard voices, were it not for the dull thunder of the surf against the outer sea-wall, booming among the rocks. Beyond the campfire was the glow of the lagoon itself, splendid silver under the stars, broken now into a soft glow of light as a boat crossed it, coming ashore from the *Lucky Lady*.

The two went forward again. The monumental mountains rose tall and black against the sky, towers of ebony against a tapestry strewn with the glitter of stars. For a moment a flaming planet seemed set like a diadem upon the very crest.

"Go up there?" queried Crazy Jake. "I show."

And to Tremaine's saying, "You seem to have been pretty much everywhere," he grinned.

"Up high, look for sail other time. I show," he answered.

They had to begin zigzagging this way and that, all progress shut off at times by steepening rock walls. But always Jake found a way, climbing where climbing was possible, clinging to crag and shrub, recognizing the insurmountable precipices and turning to right or left to come to a spot where they might clamber up again.

From each stopping place Tremaine looked back. Gradually they reached higher elevations, steadily the island spreading out below them appeared to increase in size. Again they made out Captain Wire's camp, still at no great distance away though now a full five hundred feet below them. Tremaine looked up; beetling cliff and sheer precipice above, rising to the ultimate crown of towerlike rock.

"We'll find a spot where we can stretch ourselves without falling off," he announced; "where we can keep out of sight and yet see what goes on below."

"Stay all night?"

"Yes. And, I fancy, all day tomorrow, waiting for dark to get down."

"I know where," said Jake. "You come."

Another short climb, a hazardous mo-

BUYING TROUBLE

JACKSON GREGORY

Something About the Story and What Has Happened in the Previous Chapters.

THOUGH many people have had dealings in real estate of various kinds, few have had the experience given to young Billy Tremaine—that of buying a South Sea island much as a man would buy a suburban lot—then sailing away to investigate his heritage. Son of a wealthy father, young Tremaine, full of desire for adventure and the romance of the unknown, had been given $10,000 by his father to do with as he liked. "What he liked" in this case was to invest it in an island which he bought through one Challoner who had a checkered career, but who had been able to sell him this island cut off from the rest of the world and tell him something of its history. This island which Tremaine had bought had belonged to an English earl who had visited it in his youth, used it as a honeymoon paradise for himself and his wife, then abandoned it after shipwreck on its coast in which all that he held dear was lost in the sea.

Challoner had got the island from an extraordinary sea-going man by the name of Burlock, and Challoner forced this Burlock to give also his ship the *Kamehameha* for him and Tremaine to make the voyage to the island—Tremaine had insisted that Challoner come along on the trip of exploration. They sail away and later discover that Burlock has stowed away on board the ship and makes his presence known when they near the island. When they are about to land, however, they find that others have beaten them to the shores of this faraway paradise and they recognize the ship and men of Captain Wire, a man who has an evil reputation in the South Seas. Tremaine, however, says that he is going to land to find out what Wire is doing, and although Challoner tries to dissuade him on account of the danger, Tremaine gets the captain of his ship to back him up, promising him a share in the fabulous pearl wealth which the island is supposed to contain.

Tremaine makes his way ashore, is menaced by Captain Wire, and finds that Challoner has deserted him to join Wire's party. Cleever, the captain of the *Kamehameha*, agrees to wait a certain length of time while Tremaine explores ashore, and when Tremaine is on land he comes across Crazy Jake, a queer character of those waters who has been captured and abused by Captain Wire and made his escape. Crazy Jake is of assistance to Tremaine because he knows the pathways of the island, and tells him that it is bewitched, but rich in pearls. He leads Tremaine into danger, however, by killing one of Wire's men who is stalking them, thereby giving away the fact that some of Tremaine's party have landed on the island and are spying on the Wire contingent.

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ment of crawling along a face of rock with the scantest of foothold, a sharp angling corner negotiated, and they came to a little flat open space at the foot of one of the tallest cliffs. The centuries had sifted fine soil down and wind-blown seeds had taken root, small sparse vegetation springing up. Yet it would give some scant shade during the day and offered a screen behind which a man might lie hidden and with some degree of comfort.

"Good enough," said Tremaine, and made his preparations to camp here, setting his rifle against the rock wall, emptying his pockets and unslinging his glasses and canteen. Crazy Jake watched him, then crept into the bushes, lay down and, it is to be supposed, went straight to sleep.

"Some advantage in being crazy," thought Tremaine, and stood leaning back against the wall, his eyes sweeping all the expanse of hill and swale revealed at his feet. An island "as pretty as a picture," slumbering in the starlight, ringed with the dark, faintly glinting Pacific. His island, to have and to hold—if he could hold it. He longed for morning, when he might see it in all its sparkling beauty, emerald green and lagoon-blue. What a place of peace it was naturally! And how, already, it was threatened with the foulness of avarice and the stain of blood. Why should the vicious whistle of rifle balls come here where one should hear only the boom of the white surf, the fall of a ripe cocoanut in the warm, languorous day, the rustling of the trades among the palms? Yet in his ears lingered the sharp squeaking of guns—and worse. The thud of a blow, a man's strangling cry, thud and fall and, still worse, that dread silence at the end of it. He had little doubt that Crazy Jake had killed his man—and now, not ten feet from where he mused, lay Crazy Jake placidly asleep.

"He said the island was bewitched," muttered Tremaine. Well, he himself had said all along to Challoner that some sort of a spell lay over the whole extent of these South Seas, naming it a region where anything could happen!

The focal point for eyes and thoughts alike was the camp fire where Captain Wire made his headquarters. Tremaine saw it blaze up, piled high with dead wood; watched it burn low. All night its red eye shone watchfully. When sleep clouded his musings it was still there; when he awoke under the first little shivery sense of coming dawn, there it burned.

As the light brightened Tremaine, lying flat near the cliff's edge, peering out from his leafy screen, brought his glasses to bear on the camp. The strong lenses afforded him his first glimpse of detail in the rival camp, which, he could feel, awoke to a day of alert activity. He soon made out a form which he was quick to identify as that of Captain Wire himself, a small, active man among the bigger bodied islanders and sailormen of his company. He wore drill and an enormous white straw hat; his long snow-white beard, the ends tucked into his shirt front, gave him at this distance a look of a gnome. He was astir with the first, snapping out his orders. And men leaped when Captain Wire spoke.

Crazy Jake came crawling forward and lay outstretched at Tremaine's side; his keen eyes were quick to make out the figure of the man whom he had so much reason to dread and his face grew black with his hate.

"Bad man," he grunted savagely and began fingering his knife.

Tremaine started as he saw another man step into the circle of his vision down on the beach. There was no mistaking Nick Challoner, outwardly immaculate always, giving at any distance an air of cool suavity. He joined the captain; there was a little lazy puff from his cigarette; the two talked together, apart from the rest. A hot flush of anger swept along Tremaine's blood. He had felt all along that Challoner might not be above a bit of sharp dealing, but had been loathe to think him the treacherous renegade he now most undoubtedly was.

The men at the camp stood about in knots, heads together. They would have their own bits of speculation to do; it would have been reported that there had been a skirmish last night and one of their own number killed.

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Jake was tugging at Tremaine's sleeve; he now pointed eagerly down to the beach, suddenly jerked Tremaine's rifle forward and grunted, "Cap'n Wire!"

"No," said Tremaine, sharp and angry. "If it has to come to an open fight, all right. But there's to be no more of your sort of thing."

Crazy Jake could not understand. They lay here in perfect concealment; the light was good; Tremaine had a rifle; and, best of all, white bearded, white hatted Captain Wire made a target at which any man might find a lively interest shooting.

Wire's men made a hasty breakfast. Tremaine tried to estimate their total number, guessing at those who would be at other places, constituting the cordon across the island, some few perhaps on ship board, and placed Wire's force roughly at a round score. Their meal done, they puzzled him with the way in which they acted. They trickled out of camp, like so many stragglers, some this way and some that, singly for the most part, some few in pair. A man returned from the edge of the wood, carrying an armload of fuel; another stood idly pitching shells into the lagoon. Yet within ten minutes every man of them had vanished; they seemed to fade into nothingness, to melt into the quiet world about them.

"What are they up to?" wondered Tremaine.

Only one hint did he have; he saw Captain Wire standing with Challoner before they, too, disappeared; he watched the trader raise a pair of binoculars to his eyes and stand sweeping all of the island to be seen from the beach. For the longest time did he face straight toward the crags and towers of the mountains where Tremaine lay hid.

"Oh!" muttered Tremaine, his face clearing only to darken again. "I read your game, Captain Wire."

This, as he estimated, was how matters stood with those in Wire's camp: They had learned that some one, perhaps more than one man, had broken last night through their guarding line; that one of their own crowd had been knifed. They must have speculated on the subsequent steps taken by the invaders. Had he returned to his own camp, or had he pressed on north? Perhaps they had found signs, tracks, something let fall, a rag on a bush? And Wire would say, "The man we want would take to the heights, to spy on us from there or to pick us off with a rifle." Having gone thus far in his reasoning, what would Wire do? He had already done it, sending his men forth upon the hunt.

Tremaine explained to Crazy Jake where he thought the danger to lie, ending curtly, "That knife act of yours is apt to be the end of us."

The islander looked frightened. Then he grunted and begged of Tremaine a sip of water and a bit of meat. He was not afraid, he said; they were safely hidden up here and, did any find them, Tremaine could kill them with his gun as they came up, or Jake could knock them down with big rocks. In the night they could climb up over the mountain, go down to the sea and swim back to their friends. Only a three-mile swim, nothing at all for a Marquesan. And the sharks? Oh, the sharks, as Jake had told him, did not eat crazy men.

"Then, doubtless, they'll let the two of us go," snorted Tremaine. "We've demonstrated we're neither of us sane."

Jake, when he understood, was delighted. It was a fine thing to have for friend another man just like himself.

But Tremaine was no little concerned and, worse than that, disgusted with the situation. Meaning to spy out Captain Wire's activities and through them his intentions, he found himself with nothing but an empty camp to watch while Wire, turning the tables on him, was hunting him down. The one question now was: Over so many wild acres of broken land would Wire's men be able to track him to this spot?

He craned his neck to look up. The way was steep and dangerous, yet he was

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confident that he could clamber to the very top—if left unmolested to do so. But already he fancied that men were questing in the woods below him; if he stood out, even fleetingly, in bold relief he might count with ugly certainty on drawing a stream of rifle bullets. He looked down; a similar danger threatened if he sought to gain any lower, wooded elevation. Where he was he must stay then until dark freed him. And then? He would have to let everything rest upon whatever chances night brought.

A day more unending, more restive and inactive than yesterday. Were it not for the *Lucky Lady,* idle at anchor in the lagoon, looking from here like some child's toy in an artificial pond, the island gave no sign of being occupied. Sea birds wheeled and dipped and steered off into blue distances; a flight of parrots circled the cliffs and dropped down into a grove; on a shoulder of the mountain, seen against a horizontal limb, a vivid orchid burned. And always in his ears was the roar and boom of the surf breaking against the barrier reef.

He regretted now that he had not sought out a higher ledge last night. From the top, or near the top, he should be able to see the southern tip of the island; to make out what happened at his own camp, to see the little *King Kamehameha* as well as the *Lucky Lady.*

The regret prompted a thought which made him crane his neck again to stare upward, long and searchingly. Why had not Captain Wire thought of the same thing? Why had he not placed a man up there, at the one obvious lookout point upon the whole island?

"It would be about the first thing he would do!" he grew positive. "Nothing is more sure; there is a sentinel of his up there somewhere now. If we had tried to make the top last night, we would have bumped square into him. Lucky if he hasn't spotted us down here already. No; if he had we should have heard from him before now."

He shifted his position slightly; he could still watch shore, woods below and peak above, yet was better hidden himself by the broad-leaved plants among which he lay. He called softly to the islander who had crept to a place in the shade ten feet away, lying close to the base of the cliff rising above them; to Crazy Jake he explained briefly that Wire had a man at the mountain top. Whereupon Jake pressed closer to the rocks, cocked an upward eye to make sure that he was protected by the overhanging ledges and proceeded to indulge in one of his dog-like dozes.

Once or twice during the day Tremaine caught a glimpse of something stirring among the thickets; once he saw two men nearly a mile away, carrying rifles, crossing a clearing. About noon a few men returned to the camp. Captain Wire and Challoner were among them, and Wire evidently received reports. The camp emptied itself again; the afternoon wore on tediously.

The sun sank through a clear sky, down to the curve of the horizon; the broad, glowing disk was cut in half, shrank visiby, left for a moment an intense red speck of fire and was gone. Lengthened shadows, jetblack just now, blurred and mingled into dusk. A whir of wings, birds going to rest.

No sound could have startled Tremaine more than the one which now burst suddenly upon him, a strange, mocking, almost unearthly volley of strident laughter. He leaped to his feet, his gun whipped to his shoulder. Crazy Jake, too, had sprung up; Tremaine saw the wild glare of his eyeballs and read pure terror in his crouching attitude.

The laugh came from just above. Tremaine, swerving about, had every expectation of looking into the muzzle of a rifle and of seeing behind it the gloating face of Captain Wire. Instead, what he saw was a parrot which had alighted on a crag above, had made that cackling din and then, startled by Tremaine and Jake as greatly as it had startled them, flew past them with a rush of wings.

A shrill scream burst from the islander, he clung with both hands to Tremaine's arm, jibbering.

"Bewitched! This place, bewitched——"

"Quiet!" whispered Tremaine angrily. "It's only a parrot; you've heard parrots laugh and talk——"

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"With a man to teach!" Crazy Jake was shivering as though with cold. "No man live here——"

They stood close to the cliff's edge, Tremaine having stepped back for that first glance upward. Just as he was trying to draw the terrified Marquesan down into cover a rifle shot rang out from the edge of the woods far below. A second scream burst from the Marquesan; he straightened, stiffened and then, relaxing all of a sudden, plunged headlong toward the cliff's edge. Tremaine caught at him, trying to swing him to one side, back from falling. The islander, galvanized into a final effort, threw out his arms wildly, clutching at anything. His hand chanced upon Tremaine's ankle and locked hard about it. Loose soil gave way treacherously underfoot, a weathered splinter of rock broke off—together the two men were falling.

The rifle flew out of Tremaine's grasp, rattling downward in a cascade of gravel. Tremaine clawed at the air, struck the rocks with his bootheels, and like Crazy Jake who was drawing him down to destruction strove frantically for a grip upon anything to break his fall. About his ankle, burning like a band of fire, the islander's tenacious fingers clung stubbornly as both men were catapulted downward against a little narrow ledge, which broke the sheer face of the cliff.

Half stunned for a moment, feeling in the next as if every bone in his body were broken, his left arm doubled back under him, Tremaine lay scarcely breathing. Of a sudden he realized that the band of fire no longer pressed upon his ankle. Poor Crazy Jake was gone. He shuddered—and felt himself slipping again.

Once more he struggled wildly to save himself from plunging downward. His left hand was useless; the arm, if not broken, was terribly bruised and battered and from a gash by some knifelike projection or rock the blood gushed freely. But just as he feared nothing could save him, the fingers of his right hand slipped into a fissure and held fast. He drew himself upward a few inches and stretched out as best he could along his ledge. His eyes closed from pain and as though thus he could shut out the vision of the other man going over the edge.

From far, very far below came voices. He heard them as in a dream at first, faint and vague and meaningless, certainly of no concern to him. Then the heavy stupor which briefly threatened him with total unconsciousness, passed. His eyes flew open; he saw one bright star hanging high over the mountain top. He strained his ears to catch every word now. They had poor Jake; they would come up for him in a moment.

"Got him?" He knew the shouting voice for Captain Wire's, savage and sharp. "Who is it? Ah, just what I thought! That crazy Marquesan. Dead, what? Serves him right, too. Anyone with him up there?"

Two men answered together. They were not sure; it was too dark to see. They had heard a man laugh; they had seen him move and had shot. That, and the fact that they had brought Crazy Jake tumbling down was all that they knew.

"Come with me," snapped Captain Wire. "And look sharp."

Tremaine could hear them clambering over the boulders at the base of the cliffs. He managed to shift his position a little, sitting upright; still his left arm dangled uselessly, the least movement affecting it like a knife thrust. He reflected upon the possibility that Captain Wire might not be the man for unnecessary bloodshed, but there was small comfort in the thought, for it was rather more than equally likely that he was just the man to finish in thoroughgoing fashion an ugly job to which he had set his hand.

"He'll want no uninvited witnesses to what's just happened," Tremaine decided swiftly. "If he finds me here I'm done for."

Above the mountain the big star grew brighter; on all hands the welcome dark thickened, flowing like ink into hollows and crevices. He began estimating how long it would take the men to come up where he crouched; twenty minutes at the very least, a full half hour perhaps, unless they knew of some easier way than that which he and the poor Marquesan had followed. He stirred again to take advantage of what

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little light remained and study anxiously the detail of the crags about him. Were he unmolested a few minutes, he thought that he could win his way back up to the broader ledge, but while he hesitated he realized that they must have marked that spot and would be watching there; it would be toward it that they were now climbing.

He looked right and left and, finally, though it dizzied him, straight down. And there he saw his chance, hazardous enough yet his only hope. Could he scramble downward but a few feet without losing his one-handed grip and without advising them of his act with another cascade of loose rock, he would bring up against one of the many flinty spires which appeared based on a bowl of ink; a deep hollow, that, which would be entirely hidden from below and, he hoped, inconspicuous from above. Two or three minutes were all that were required, could the brief journey be made at all; let it be done in silence and there was hope for him.

He waited a moment, listening, hoping to judge just where Wire and his men were; he grew impatient yet kept telling himself that all the while the dark was thickening and the dark was his best friend. Presently he heard the men in the distance; a rifle barrel clanged against a rock. They were taking the long, roundabout way; perhaps the only way up the steep slope. Now was his chance and he took it without further delay.

He caught a doggedly firm grip with his right hand, slewed his body about and set his feet questing resting places in the shadows beneath him. For a few seconds he hung poised between death and discovery, and had little doubt that discovery would prove but another name for death. He found a toe-hold, tried it out, judged it secure and then shifted his hand to a new, lower grip. A fragment of rock scaled off under his fingers, his foot-hold gave way at the same instant and again he felt his body slipping. Clutch as wildly as he did, with nails breaking and flesh torn, he could not altogether stay his fall, but he did manage with a last, mighty effort to give some direction to it. In other words, instead of dropping straight down he succeeded in lurching sideways, twisting over and angling off to the right. Thus by some few inches he saved himself; he slid against the flinty shaft of rock which he had chosen as his goal and it stopped him. In another second he had crept into the shadow-filled hollow at the side of the rude column and was hidden from above by a scanty fringe of vegetation which grew like a ragged eyebrow over a sunken eye.

In a little while he heard Wire and his men again, sending occasional débris spilling down the steep slopes, speaking after long silences. Following that natural stairway which had invited him and Crazy Jake upward, they came in time to that ledge where Tremaine had spent the day and which was directly above him now. He could not see them for the overhang of the cliff, but from their talk he knew what they had found and what they surmised.

"One man or two?" Captain Wire asked sharply. "Here's a canteen; here's food. Where did Crazy Jake come by such? Look sharp, you birds, and shoot at the first stir."

A man spoke up, saying: "Jake must have been alone. No man with him could have got away without our seeing him; he'd have gone overboard like Jake. The canteen and grub could have been come by at either camp, stole; might have been begged of the *Kamehameha's* crew, Jake promising to snake back and do some of us in."

"Stop your gab, Banning, and use your eyes," growled Wire, after having heard the man through, however.

They hunted high and low. Tremaine knew when they came to the edge to look down, warned by the scrape and rattle of gritty particles. Then they climbed farther up. In the end they went away. He heard them again far below in the edge of the wood, talking as they went. Talking noisily, it struck him. He listened eagerly, alert with suspicion. He made out Captain Wire's voice, dying away in the distance; he caught, too, another voice answering, a high pitched, shrill utterance. But he did not hear the raucous tones of the fellow whom Wire called Banning.

"Of course," meditated Tremaine savagely, "they'd do that. Leave a man be-

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hind to watch and make certain; to try and fool me and pop me off at the first move."

He lay back wearily. Captain Wire was nobody's fool; he'd have a man here all night. He would even send other men, creeping silently through the woods, to watch until day. They had left poor Jake where he had fallen—— Well, Jake was beyond all pain now; he knew nothing of the agony of a battered body, was insensate to tormenting thirst.

Tremaine began to think only of his canteen. He would give all the pearls of the South Seas for a long, long, long drink of water.

CHAPTER X

OUT OF THE NIGHT

IT GREW very dark among the mountain crags. Tremaine rose softly, with lips compressed to stifle a groan. But he told himself he was no worse off physically than he had been after more than one football game. Despite the pain he flexed his left arm a bit; no bones broken, at any rate. He worked awkwardly a moment, contriving a sling of the strap which had carried his field glasses along with him in his fall. Next he removed his shoes, tying them by their laces to his belt; toes must aid fingers tonight and, besides, one made less noise barefooted.

He meant to be far from here by daylight, yet paused a moment longer to shape his plans. He would have given much to know if there was a man on the ledge above him; if others gathered already in the woods below. The dark at once befriended him, offering him a chance of escape, and threatened him, since every black spot might harbor one of Wire's men.

Which way, now? As nearly horizontally as possible for a while, then upward. Certainly not down toward the woods; for, though they invited temptingly with remembered streams of cool water, they repelled with virtual certainty of watchful ambush. His one chance as he saw it was to climb up over the mountain top, to descend the far side, praying to find a spring, a pool, a running stream. Wire's sentinel up there? He must run that risk and, after all, it was only a surmise that a lookout would have been posted on the heights. Further, encouraging him, came the thought that whereas a watch up there would be of service during the daytime, it could avail little in the dark. Doubtless the sentinel, had there been one, would have returned to camp long ago and a new one would not be posted until morning. And, in any case, he could expect to have to do with one man only at the crest, whereas there might be many below.

He inched along. His grew into a fearsome task since he could not see what sheer precipices he skirted and imagination converted every brief slope into a dizzy perpendicular fall of naked rock. His toes clung to crack and cranny and seam; his socks were soon worn through, his feet bloody. His hand was like a talon. Sweat ran down his face.

By inches he fought on, down a little here, up a little there, working off as far as he could from the ledge where he was so sure a man watched and listened. He came to places where questioning hand and feet could find no grasp, expanses almost glassy-smooth. He drew back, retraced a few hard steps, sought elsewhere. His heart was in his throat half the time; a false step, a weathered handhold giving away, a wild plunge—the end of all things for him.

But, slow and tedious and tortuous as was the way, he made progress. Cautious, silent progress, since he took infinite pains not to dislodge a scrap of rock to betray him with its rattling fall. And presently the way became easier; he had crossed the steepest part of the mountainside and came to a more gentle slope where soil had gathered and plants grew in dots here and there. He rested and listened and went on. And now he began climbing again.

Making his way about a flank of the mountain, attaining its southeasterly or rainward side, he came into a region of

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greater fertility. The thorny lantana, which hitherto had been sparse and low, created denser taller thickets now; here and there a tall shrub rose or a tree loomed against the sky. He quested in every hollow for water; he fancied over and over that he heard its gurgle and splash. He began chewing twigs and stems.

On and on he went; up and still up. Hours passed. He began to fear that day would glint the mountaintop before he could reach it. He turned aside for every clump of trees; he dreamed of finding a cocoanut, of gulping down its nectar. But the best that he found was the fei, a thick grove of the Polynesian mountain banana, rare, hardy climber which thrives even a mile above shoreline. He ate slowly, holding the fruit a long while in his mouth; his throat was so dry he could scarcely swallow.

Above him he saw the towerlike summit looming against the stars. He was nearly there, after all. He pressed on; he would throw himself down at the top, have a good rest, make what survey he could of this place of lofty crags and pick out the likeliest way down to the lower lands on the far side.

But he went cautiously again. It was unlikely that Captain Wire kept a man here at night, yet it was far from impossible. The last few feet he crept on hand and knees; when he rose slowly he had a jagged stone in his left hand, his only weapon.

The starlight glinted on bare rocks, on a little grassy open space, on the broad leaves of a grove of wild bananas. Here was a mountain glade not over a hundred paces in diameter, ringed about by sharply upthrust peaks. Yonder was his "tower," rising like an ancient war turret, tallest of all the beetling crags. There, if anywhere, should he expect to see his sentinel.

And now with that sentinel, did he exist, Tremaine meant to have a word. Battered and worn out as he was, armed only with a stone, he was determined to hunt out any man that Wire might have placed here. For his whole fevered body screamed aloud for water, and if there were a lookout here he would have a canteen.

Tremaine, seeing no one, drew nearer. His tower appeared now to be a queerly piled-up mass of stones, rudely conical upward from the base a score of feet, topped with a single enormous boulder. By daylight it might turn out to be a single weathered rock. But what concerned him was that its sides were scalable; he could climb up noiselessly in his bare feet. He sought to moisten his dry lips with an almost equally dry tongue and began climbing.

It was a strange yet positive disappointment to find no sentinel here. The level space at the top was untenanted. He drew himself slowly up, groaned aloud in his surge of dejection, let the stone slip from his fingers and, like the stone itself, dropped down, inert. He lay flat on his back, eyes closed against the starry glimmer overhead. He knew now what it was to feel at the end of the tether.

His relaxing hand brushed against something round, something which stirred softly at his touch. He started up, staring; his first thought was that he had touched a man's head. A cocoanut!

He did not stop to ask how it came here. He shook it at his ear and heard the sweetest of all sounds, a gentle sloshing within. He held it between his knees, sitting with legs in front of him; he began worrying at one of the "eyes" with his pocket knife. He drove the hole through it, then another, and lifted the fruit to his burning lips and drank. Cool, sweet nectar.

It was like pouring new strength, freshly revitalized splendid youth into his veins. He drained the contents; a kindly brilliance rushed into the shine of the stars.

He was not for a moment in doubt as to how came the cocoanut here; the work of Captain Wire's sentry, of course, left here against tomorrow's need. Bits of shell were scattered about; there were two more of the big, glorious nuts, unopened.

"Prize of war and I'll take 'em along," grunted Billy Tremaine. "I've had all the thirst tonight one man needs to feel in a lifetime."

As he made his way down from the tower-rock he noted how fast the stars were paling; day was coming swiftly. Soon now, at any moment, the man whose pro-

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visions he had appropriated, could be looked for returning to his lookout. He turned into the grove of mountain fei, meaning to find a place to hide the cocoanuts and to come by some crude weapon, if only a stout club, with which to replace his jagged stone. The starlight fell softly through the still, glistening leaves above him; a patch of tender light yonder in a small clearing was like a placid pale golden pool.

Just as he saw this place of light he saw a figure emerge from the surrounding shadows, passing swiftly through it, someone as silent and as stealthy as himself. One of Captain Wire's men was his first thought. But in a flash he realized that it was no man at all! The hastening figure, small and slender, had a head of hair that cascaded waist-low. He even made out that there were flowers in the thick tresses,-one big white flower like a star.

The first thing that Tremaine thought of was Crazy Jake and his stubborn insistence that the island was bewitched; that he himself had seen the haunting spirit of the place. She was bathed in the wan, uncertain glow of the pool of light; it silvered bare arm and shoulder, knee and ankle, and made a pretty mystery of the queer little dress which she wore.

Stepping along swiftly but in cautious silence, she came on several paces before she saw him standing in the shadows. Thus she came close enough to hear her sudden startled cry. In another instant she was gone, whisking away among the shadows, vanishing.

Chapter XI

Featherweight Rock

THE stars dimmed faster and faster; in a little while it would be day. Driving his battered body forward only by a mighty bending of his will, Tremaine moved on into the grove; he must come at an explanation of this new figure, the native girl. She was not a vision, not pure fancy of a man fevered with pain; there before him lay the big white flower which had tumbled from her hair. A real girl here where he was hard beset to explain her presence; one who had seen him and had fled on the instant—whither?

Well, as he had had cause to remind himself often enough, here was the land where anything could happen. A girl, sure enough. But what did she here all alone? How did she come here? And why? There was Burlock now; a stowaway. She could have done the very same thing Burlock did. Not likely, though.

She came on board the *Lucky Lady*. Of course; obvious; not even surprising. With Captain Wire; his light of love? Perhaps his daughter? At any rate she must be one of his company—and she had seen Tremaine here. He sat up hurriedly.

As he moved he was wracked with pain from head to foot. His arm was terribly swollen; his whole body sorer than ever and so stiff and cramped that it was an effort, a tremendous effort to stand up. The hand which he had made do service for two was raw and tender, rusty with blood from countless cuts and tears. He limped as he took a first staggering step. Yet he went reeling on, flogging his agonized muscles with what was left him of his will, making his way among the trees.

He wanted to find her; that was the first thing to be done. She must tell him what she did here, if she was one of Captain Wire's unholy crowd and if she meant to betray him to them. At every step he took he stopped, peering this way and that, yet he could catch no glimpse of her. He sought doggedly, among boulders, behind screens of greenery where vines and broad leaves suggested places of concealment.

He was about to call out when he heard voices, and grew tense and still. The voices of several men, coming up the mountainside and making no attempt at lowered tones. The lookout already? Or men hurrying after him, already told that he was here, hurt and unarmed? He lis-

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tened intently and though as yet he could make out no words he received one piece of unwelcome information. One of the men was Captain Wire himself. There was no mistaking that voice at any distance, harsh and metallic, like the sharp plucking at a discordant steel string.

There was nothing to do but seek to hide. Perhaps they did not yet know that he was here and would not hunt over closely for him. There should be some place among these trees, vines and rocks where he could lie concealed. In any case, it was impossible for him to elude them by open flight; far from being able to treat them to a burst of speed it was just about all that he could do to walk. So he cast about him eagerly, seeking the likeliest place. He must make haste; the day was swiftly advancing and they would be here in five minutes.

There was a coppice, thick as the jungle like growths on the shore, not above a dozen paces or so from the base of the towering rocks. Deep in this coppice he glimpsed the broken outline of a boulder. He made his way painfully toward it. Once a limb brushed his injured arm and the pain brought a groan to his lips.

He went on, stooping now, finally crawling, penetrating this pigmy jungle. At times he lurched unsteadily; he was conscious of breaking stems and crushing leaves, and knew that he left a blazed trail behind him for sharp suspicious eyes to follow. But he could only trust to a merciful fate and go on. Thus he came presently to the boulder and slumped down to lie stretched out flat, close in its shelter.

He heard a little sound behind him and jerked his head about, expecting to look into a rifle barrel. Instead he saw the girl. There she, too, lay in hiding and so close that he could almost put out his hand and touch her. The light was dim and uncertain but her whole attitude was one of wild terror; she crouched low like a frightened animal, trapped. He fancied that he saw her shoulders quiver to a long shudder.

Afraid that she was going to leap up, crying out, he commanded her to silence with a low, *"Sh!"* For the voices were nearer now, much nearer. Captain Wire and at least two of his men were in the clearing at the mountain top.

"Don't believe anyone came up this way," said Wire, "it being my mind that Crazy Jake was all alone. But we'll have a look round to make sure."

Tremaine glanced at his companion in hiding to make out what she meant to do. This time he was certain that a convulsive shudder set her trembling. She was afraid of him; he had known that all along. But she was no less afraid of the others! Captain Wire's harsh voice had terrified her afresh. Why was she afraid of them, having come here with them? A tough lot he fancied; as bad no doubt as were to be found carrying on their traffic in the far out places, where courts and other law than their own were not. No daughter of Wire's at all, in all likelihood; some poor little native girl, rather, who had been tricked or constrained aboard and who had fled them in wild panic.

But the voices drew his attention away from her. Wire led the way up the rocky pyramid; Tremaine could see him now through the leaves, standing at the top, his rifle across his arm. Two men joined him. From this point of vantage they stood a while looking out in all directions.

Of a sudden a man cried out excitedly, "Why, look here, Cap'n! I left some nuts here last night. Gone! That's what they are; gone. Someone's been here."

Tremaine lost sight of the three forms as each man stooped or knelt, to peer about. There was a little flare of light; one of them had struck a match. Then came a second exclamation, exultant now, from Wire himself.

"Ah, we winged him boys! Here's blood. We'll get him after this; he won't be far."

Then climbed down from the rocks and vanished among the grove. Tremaine knew when one of them came to the spot where he had lain; a cry again, the eager an-

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nouncement like the voice of a baying dog, hot on the scent.

"He's been here. Here's a strap of some sort hanging from a limb. A bloody leaf too; and the nuts. Fresh signs, Cap'n!"

"Good!" barked Captain Wire. "Keep your eyes peeled, boys."

Tremaine sat up. With discovery inevitable, he meant to take his last chance. Close at hand he found a sharp-edged stone; he drew it to him and partly rose. It was his thought and his last hope that the men would scatter, looking here and there; that the one who found him would come on alone. Tremaine might take him by surprise, hurling the stone full into his face, and snatch his gun from him.

He turned again to the girl. She might read his purpose in his gestures now. He made a quick motion.

He dared not speak aloud but he whispered urgently, "Slip away; now's your chance. You can make it, if you go quietly and slow. It'll be broad daylight in a minute. Hurry."

He was afraid that she did not understand him. She too had risen to her knees and was staring wildly at him. Perhaps she had no English? He gestured again, and kept on whispering. If she meant to flee, she must make haste. As for him, the thing was impossible; he would move like an awkward bear in a thicket, advertising his presence a hundred yards off.

She whipped to her feet now in a flash. She parted the leaves before her; as silent as light falling through a tangle she withdrew. He nodded encouragement and gestured to say, "Go on, go on. Quick!"

He was turning again toward Wire and his men when he saw her stop. She appeared to hesitate; she started again; she stopped once more. He gestured frantically. Somehow his act seemed to decide her. She began to beckon, hesitant and uncertain at first, then eagerly, urgently. He heard the whisper:

"Come."

He shook his head emphatically.

"No. No go that. Can't be done. I'm all in."

Again she urged. "Come!" She began nodding her head as he had done a moment ago. She even came a step closer; she was like a bird that wants to light upon a hand which it knows and trusts and yet, impelled by instinctive fears, flirts back from touching. Her excitement was as clear as the new day, already tipping the tree tops. She grew almost frantic, beckoning.

Something in her attitude impressed him strangely. Did she know of some hiding place where they would not be found?

She beckoned again, turned away, stopped and pleaded mutely with him. Slowly he drew close to her. She ran now, only two or three steps and then amazed him by what she did. She was close to the boulder in whose shelter he had hidden; she stooped to it as though she meant to lift it! A boulder weighing a ton—ten tons.

She was lifting it! Had he gone mad, stark, staring, raving mad? "Bewitched!"

Yet the edge of the boulder came up under her touch, looking to be lifted as light as a feather. It was tipped and tilted; its lower surface was flat and smooth. Moved thus it disclosed a square opening. She slipped down, still beckoning. Tremaine followed, half stupefied. He, too, slipped through. He felt a solid rock stairway under foot. Above the pale sky through a square orifice. But in a moment the sky was blotted out; the boulder had sunk back into place. There was only pitch dark and wonderment for Tremaine—only these and the soft brushing of the girl against him as she led the way, speeding as one accustomed down a short flight of steps and along a rocky passageway. Groping, never a man more bewildered, he followed after the faint rustling sound of her bare feet.

Chapter XII

The Lady of the Cliff

TREMAINE'S bewilderment, utter though it seemed, proved to be but in its incipient stages. He was only on the brink of discovery topping discovery until the whole edifice of the incredible threatened to transcend his power of belief.

From the beginning he understood that this hiding place was man-made and no

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freak of capricious nature. That boulder turned as though it were swivelled upon a steel rod piercing it—as in fact it was. The stairway was smooth and regular, the passage way along which he groped, feeling the walls with his hand, was made by man's ingenuity and skilful labor.

The soft patter of bare feet led him on. His own were bare and made scarcely more sound. He followed her down a second flight of steps and came abruptly into a region of dim light. He went on, seeing a broad doorway through which the light came. Thus, at last he came up with her, in the stronger light. It was as bright here as out in the open.

He could only stand and stare, from her to her surroundings, from those surroundings back to her.

The chamber about which he glanced, stupidly enough at first, was long, lofty and broad. Heavy hewn beams supported the ceiling; from the central one hung a light cluster. Three of the walls were finished in dully gleaming hardwood; the fourth, outer wall, pierced by a row of casement windows, looked out to the glinting blue of the Pacific, just catching the first of the morning light. There were tables, rugs, books. Several doors, some standing open, gave promise of other rooms. When he sat down, all of a sudden, it was to sink deep, luxuriously into a cushiony armchair.

She stood, drawn back from him, against the far wall and near an open door, the light from the windows falling on her. Slim, petite, graceful as a flower, she gave him again that impression of a bird hesitant between temptation to linger and ancient instinct toward flight. As brown as October leaves wherever her single little garment failed to protect her against the ardent southern sun, clad simply and yet daintily in a couple of yards of white silk, she was as impossible as everything around her.

"You would not harm a damsel in distress?" she asked breathlessly, as timid as any wild thing that ever darted and hid in forestlands. "You are some noble knight, methinks; valiant and pure of heart."

She spoke queerly, accent no less than the words themselves; there were little pauses; the oddest of all inflections tinged her speech. Neither French nor Spanish nor Italian, he'd swear; not German and not any northern tongue—not anything he had ever heard. He roused himself from the abstraction into which she had plunged him, answering her hastily:

"Good Lord, no! Think I could even dream of doing you harm, when here you've just saved my life for me? Why, I wouldn't—— High Heavens, there's a piano even!" he gasped.

She had followed his words eagerly, leaning forward, not breathing until he was done; a little frown of concentration wrinkled the brow shadowed by her hair. She hung upon every word as if life and death might be in each syllable. He had never witnessed a prettier picture of concentration; it was as if she listened to a tongue but half understood, her need the sorest to sift every expression and inflection. Now she spoke again, passing from word to word as among stepping stones, coming falteringly to her conclusion.

"You are not then, Sir Stranger, of the brotherhood of those villains who invade my quiet strand in all horrid lawlessness?"

Billy Tremaine, staring at one whom he had taken for a little brown native girl and hearing words like these, was vastly perplexed. Not knowing just how to answer her he sat silent and fell to studying her with so deep an intentness that his soberness was almost stern, and she drew back with a hint of alarm in her eyes.

"Oh, sir," she pleaded softly, "be not displeased! Oh, Stranger from some far country, be merciful and kind, knowing that never did unfortunate maid have greater, sorer need of tender gentleness. Here, ringed all about by villains, fierce wild unholy men, I know only anguish and mortal terror. But you, sir, are not of their wanton number; that I know! It would be of your golden nature to befriend me."

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Tremaine, from watching her wonderingly and in silence, pondered swiftly and now spoke.

"First of all," he said, "what about those men up yonder? Can they follow us here in any way? Can they by chance find how to move the big rock at the top of your stairs? I do not think that any of them saw us, but——"

"We are safe here from them, sir."

"We must be sure of that; dead sure. My path up there, broken straight into the heart of the thicket, must lead them to the rock. If the scent be discovered ——"

"No, sir," she answered him confidently. It's unlikely they should chance upon it and, were they to do so, I have shot the bolt from beneath.

"They can't come to the windows?"

"No, my casements are not to be guessed nor seen, save from out at sea. And even now, with daylight, I close them. From without, by day, when closed, they are like the rock itself."

She began closing the windows and Tremaine, rising with some degree of difficulty, went to help her. The casements swung in easily, though complaining upon their hinges; he saw, looking out, how they were set into the steepest fall of smooth cliff and how, as she had said, their outer sides were not to be told from the rock itself at a distance; they closed with iron shutters differing little in coloration from the substance in which they were set.

With the closing of these shutters it grew dark again in the spacious room, some little light entering dimly from one of the broad doors. Toward this door she led the way just as Tremaine was ready to expect a finger at a switch and the place electrically flooded.

"Will you be pleased to follow me to my boudoir?" she invited.

"Aye, by my halidome!" grinned Billy Tremaine.

They entered a smaller room of which he could make little in the dimmer light, then passed through a short hallway and came into a tiny compartment where the brightening daylight entered freely. A deeply recessed window stood wide open, set cunningly between outthrust rocky projections, hidden from above by an overhang of the cliff. Like the first room this was richly furnished and somewhat more daintily; drawn close to the window was a Louis XVI table holding books, a slender crystal vase with red and yellow flowers, flanked by a comfortable lounging chair. His guide led the way, her little bare brown feet twinkling across a rich rug; she drew out a stool and sat down, motioning him toward the chair.

"Here they shall neither see nor hear us," she said as he lowered himself gingerly into the chair. "Yet shall we speak softly, for it would be an evil thing if by any chance they discovered us, those ungodly churls."

Billy Tremaine, with reason enough to grow oblivious of cuts and bruises, fell again to watching her intently, half expecting that at any moment her sober mouth would twitch to sudden, irrepressible mirth and so bring her to an end of this mystifying pretence. Yet, under his piercing look she appeared but to grow more grave. Her eyes met his steadily, filled with anxiety. And in this light, with her so close to him, only a small table between them, he saw that her eyes were not the night black orbs to be expected, but of a soft, heavenly gray.

Here, then, was no native, island girl at all; not even one of mixed blood, the half-breed type met everywhere in the South Seas. Pure white, rather; he was sure of that.

"Shall we explain ourselves a bit?" he asked at last. He smiled as he went on. "I find it hard, somehow, to believe that you are real! As for me, I'm Bill Tremaine, American, late of San Francisco."

"Bill Tremaine, American," she repeated gravely after him. A flash of his innate joyousness made his eyes dance, and he smiled at her. "And now, for you. You come, of course, along with Captain Wire's crowd?"

"Captain Wire? Who is he?"

"He's that gray-beard scoundrel looking for me right now up there on the cliffs. Don't you know? Didn't you come on the *Lucky Lady?*"

"That great war vessel which has sailed into my bay? No, I came with no recent

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arrivals. I have dwelt here always."

"You have lived here always?" he gasped. "Then the island is not uninhabited after all? But where then are the others—your people?"

"There are none, Mr. Bill. I live here alone. And here have I dwelt in solitude since old Uncle William died. It's so long ago, it seems as if it never had been."

"But this place, those rooms?" exclaimed the puzzled Tremaine. "Surely you two could never make such a place!"

"My castle, Mr. Bill? Oh, no; it was the work of many men working at the command of my father, a most glorious and gentle gentleman."

"Then your father—— But you have not told me who you are?"

She answered quietly and simply:

"I am the Lady Gwendolyn and Princess of Pearl Island."

"And your father who caused your castle to be built? Is he living?"

"Oh, no," she told him sadly. "Drowned

these many years when a big ship sank near by in the sea."

"And his name?" cried Tremaine eagerly. And guessed the answer before it was spoken:

"He was Charles Alfred Vincent Devon, Earl of Dale-Stretton."

Chapter XIII

HIDDEN CHAMBERS

ALL that Challoner had told of Dale-Stretton during the idle days on the *King Kamehameha,* a tale awakening ready sympathy, recalled in detail, served now toward enlightenment. The young Englishman had made two successful trips here; on the second, Challoner had said, he had chartered a freighter, bringing artisans and materials to create this strange mid-Pacific structure. A young man, fanciful, wealthy and extravagant, giving free rein to a romantic impulse: To bring a bride into a little, unguessed paradise, all their own.

Books everywhere; books to be read in the still, languid afternoons of a golden honeymoon. Most of them seemed to be old romances, lyric tales of lords and ladies fair, brought across the seas by a young lover to share the soft Edenic hours with him and his beloved.

"Will you tell me all about yourself—Lady Gwendolyn?" asked Tremaine gently. "What you know of how you come here? And about your Uncle William?"

"Most gladly, will I do as you wish in this," she said, smiling a little, and then sighing and finally adding, "But the tale is long and may be told another time, while now it seems that Mr. Bill in some passage of arms, has been hurt. After your wounds are dressed and you have rested somewhat, shall each one of us recount for the other those strange adventures which end now in bringing us together."

Upon a wall of the little room was a great mirror, so placed that Tremaine, glancing that way, saw both her and himself reflected in it. To see himself as he was at this moment brought a positive shock; small wonder that she had been afraid of him! Clothes torn to rags, feet more exposed than hidden by socks cut in ribbons, face grimy and smeared with dry blood. Any man would look the villain bearing these marks of hardship. Further he was gaunt and pale and his eyes looked wild.

Yet, as his eyes came back to a meeting with hers, his characteristic quick, warm, smile, humorous and friendly, did much to efface the unprepossessing effect left by his hours on the cliffs.

"If I might crave of your ladyship——"

He came to a dead halt, then laughed. How easy it was to slip into her manner of speech; she created an atmosphere, she and the old romances.

"Any boon, Mr. Bill," she said in her quaint, serious way. "'T is yours for the asking."

"Boon was the word," Tremaine said gaily. "Had it on the very tip of my tongue. If you have water here, and if

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I might cleanse myself of some of this blood and grime——"

She looked cast down.

"'T is so far to bring water, that for the greater part I go down to the rivulet to quench my thirst and to a pretty pool to bathe. Yet, if what little I have will suffice, I brought up an ewer full yesterday."

"No, no; I couldn't think of using that. Besides, cooped up here, you'll want it to drink——"

"Oh, for drink we shall not lack. I have always at hand an ample store of the big nuts. Will you come with me, to a chamber which shall be yours? The water is there."

She led him to a room adjoining. This, like the others, had windows pierced in the cliff wall. They were closed and it was as dim as dusk here until she opened one of the casements a few inches and the brightening morning peeped in. Now he saw the room's furnishings, an old English four-poster, canopied, with curtains partly drawn, a table, chairs, rugs; a smaller table on which stood bowl and pitcher. She poured out the water for him and ran for a towel from a brass-bound cedar chest.

"I'll wait for you in my boudoir," she said from the door.

He washed as well as he might with one hand and in what haste he could command, being strangely impatient to return to her. What an amazing creature she was. He could scarcely wait to have her whole story. Lady Gwendolyn, daughter of Dale-Stretton, his "belted earl." What a life she must have lived, alone here since babyhood, reading her books, guessing at life through their glamorous pages, dreaming such dreams, all golden edifices, as reared themselves from tales of old romance. Knowing no human being all these years except that Uncle William who had told her who she was and had taught her to read—and had died.

He went to the dressing table with its French mirrors to finish his makeshift toilet. He got his face clean by a dint of scrubbing; managed with his fingers to bring some order into the wild disarray of his hair; stared frowning at his torn socks and finally decided that bare feet were less monstrously hideous.

When he went back to her and she rose and made him a pretty courtesy, he gasped at the vision.

"I am not always dressed as you found me. Mr. Bill," she said smiling brightly, reading his look. "Had you mistaken me for some wild creature, I could not have marvelled at it. But, to descend the mountain slopes, to be swift and silent in the darkness to escape those villains who landed lately, I have to dress differently than at home."

She looked, in her change of raiment, to have stepped freshly out of one of her own well-loved volumes. He did not know if her feet were still bare, so were they hidden under the folds of silk falling to the floor. Blue silk, shaped doubtless by her own hands, some favorite picture propped up before her. Her hair was coiled and fixed high upon her head, a red blossom from her vase burned like a red jewel among the bronzy brown tresses.

"And now, Mr. Bill, there being no one else here to serve you, may I dress your wound?"

"A sprained arm only," said Billy Tremaine. "I don't know quite what to do for it. I suppose the best thing is to let it alone——"

Yet she had seen how he was never free from the pain of it and strove to do something; she cut the sleeve and rolled it back to the shoulder with fingers so gentle that he thought of them as little brown butterflies. He watched her face; it grew grave with concern and, when she saw how swollen the arm was, her eyes grew misty with quick sympathy, tears formed and ran unchecked and unhidden down her cheeks.

"That's a bad wound, Mr. Bill. I could cry for you, and yet, when you're better again, I'll be so glad. For it was because of your wounds that I began to understand that you were not at one with those outlaws from whom we both withdrew here; that you were fighting them so valiantly, and therefore you were some one I could trust. And so, fleeing myself, I brought you here, into my secret fortress

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and castle. And I'm so glad," she added naively.

Billy Tremaine, the light of heart, one who had ever gone at life with a rush and found laughter the readiest of all echoes to awaken about him, fell silent now and grew sober; in some new and strange way she touched him with quiet awe. She was quaint and dainty and peerless. Even his thoughts must dwell upon her like a man's heavy fingers growing awkwardly gentle about a piece of rare fragile china.

"Thank you, Lady Gwendolyn," he said rather humbly.

They had improvised a bandage; he sat back, pale and a little faint. She stood over him, looking at him with frank anxiety.

"You must rest," she said softly. "I shall bring food and drink and you will sleep. Only when you are strong and rested must we hold lengthy speech together that in our hearts nothing may lie concealed."

But he could not for long forget the men seeking him. What if, through him, they came upon her? What rough brutes they were; the bare thought that they might seek to set their bestial hands upon her made him shudder.

"Is there no chance of those men finding us? Are you sure?" he asked again.

"We are safe here, Mr. Bill. Only at night have I gone out since their coming. No entrance leads in here save the one we used in coming, and who shall find that? Further, there is an iron bolt, as I have told you, which from the underside holds the great rock moveless."

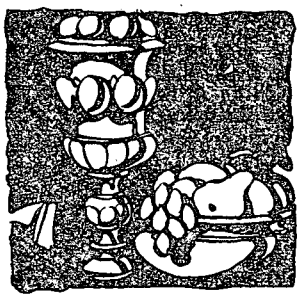
Tremaine fell a prey to a queer complexity of sensations. A few feet away from where he sat relaxed in a cozy chair were Captain Wire and his men, seeking him. Down yonder, on the beach was Wire's camp; Challoner was there. Armed men went up and down. And, a mile or so away, the *King Kamehameha* rode at anchor in the lagoon, nodding at her own image in the blue mirror. There was Burlock. There, close by on shore, were Tom Cleever and his men.

And here, far removed from all that might happen, was Billy Tremaine, asking no better right now than to sit and look into the big, soft gray eyes of the Lady Gwendolyn!

"It's all wrong; I ought to be back with Cleever," he said within himself. And still within himself, he made rejoinder, "But how's it to be done? Shut off as I am, pretty well done in, rifle gone—and broad daylight making it impossible for me to go a hundred steps without being shot down."

And, aloud, accepting his hostess' invitation, "If you have not eaten yet this morning? And are in need of a bit of rest yourself, being abroad last night until dawn?"

She sped away to prepare and spread a meal; soon she came back, trundling before her a little wheeled serving table. The service was of the best, heavy silver as might have been expected in the Dale-Stretton home in England; the food what the island afforded. Snow-white bits of cocoanut, ripe bananas, dusky red grapes, small oranges like golden globes, slender glasses of cocoanut milk.



"All fruits grow in paradise!" said Tremaine, smiling.

"These," she explained, pointing to oranges and grapes, "were brought from a distant country and made to grow upon these shores by the Earl of Dale-Stretton — my father. My Uncle William told me the tale."

In fragments he got her story; a bit now over their table, others in the still days which followed. When Dale-Stretton's pleasure yacht had been wrecked a man and a little girl only five years old had been saved. The man, a brother of Dale-Stretton, had thought to save others before seeking to save himself. There had been little time but he had found and caught up his little niece, plunging overboard with her in his arms before the vessel went down. He had snatched a life-protector as he ran; being a strong, vigorous swimmer, that and his own will kept them afloat for hours. A relenting fate and a kind current did the rest; they were

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borne in through the break in the sea-wall and deposited alive upon the white beach. A miracle, this Uncle William had ever deemed it, since a thousand times they escaped death so narrowly; a gentle and mighty act of God. Thus they came to shore alive, the little child with scarcely a tiny bruise, so did the man's arms shelter her; he alive—and that was all. Yet he lived for some years, clinging to life with that glorious will that had kept him and her so many hours above water, rearing her gently, teaching her to read happiness in books and God in sky and sea and flower. When he died, he assured her that his spirit merely passed on and that it would wing its way back, often, though unseen, to watch over her.

She smiled and again her tears welled up and spilled over unchecked.

"It has been lonely without him—until you came, Mr. Bill. But as he promised his spirit came winging back to be with me in my days and nights of great loneliness. I could feel him with me."

"Yes," said Tremaine under his breath, and turned away to stare out through the window at the blue waters stretching away into infinity. Those wide waters washed many a shore, lapping the beaches of those thousands of islands dotting the Pacific. Many of these isolated, ocean-bound lands were the homes of broken men, men snapped between the iron fingers of their relentless, unmerciful destiny. Tremaine knew of such a man, one whom this girl mourned as dead, clothing him with tender, sanctified memory. What a look he could bring leaping up into her eyes with three homely little words, "Your father lives!" Yet how could he speak them? How her eagerness winged with swift questions would rush her along to complete knowledge and a new kind of despair. If he told her a little, he would have to tell her all——

"No," he was thinking, "the thing to do is get word to Dale-Stretton first that his little daughter survived. Who knows what the knowledge may do for him? He may almost find her mother again in her."

She was watching his face closely.

"Your thoughts travel far," she said softly.

He brought his eyes back from the shimmering sea, his mind back from distant considerations.

"Yes," he said; "you set one thinking, Lady Gwendolyn! Among other thoughts comes this one: Though your island lies so far apart from all the rest of the world it must appear strange that no vessel has ever touched here in all these years; that no chance for escape has come your way."

"But," she answered, her eyes round, "with what sort of men should I go? For men have come here sometimes aforetime though with very long periods between their visits. And, among them all, none until you came, Mr. Bill, whom I did not greatly fear."

This amazed him until he had in full her explanation. The first men she ever saw, after her uncle died, were the crew of a little, storm-buffeted trading schooner. They had made a landing in the late afternoon. She had watched them, at once fascinated and fearful. In the dusk she had crept down the mountainside, drawing close to their camp fire. Hidden among shrubs, she had heard them talk. She began to fear them from their rough voices even before she caught the first word, and their words but inspired fresh fears. As rough, quarrelsome and drunken a crew as ever sailed even in these waters; from words they passed to blows and, while she cowered within stone's throw, one man drove a knife to the hilt into a comrade's throat. She had seen the islander, Crazy Jake, too. He terrified her with his strange ways and mad mutterings; she had watched him many a time in secret. One night she had barely escaped him, fleeing, sure that he had seen her. But he, it appeared, was frightened, too. No; her serenest days were those when no sail dotted all the wide expanse of her view.

"Until you came, Mr. Bill," she ended her tale, smiling a little.

"But, after a while—when it can be arranged—you will let me take you away, Lady Gwendolyn? Back to the world?"

Her eyes began to sparkle and she leaned toward him eagerly.

"To live among people like my own, Mr. Bill? Oh——"

There was a sudden flutter of wings,

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a quiet rustle of feathers; Tremaine, jerking about, saw a parrot dip in at the open window, alight upon the table and cock a bright and impertinent eye at him as though to demand by what right he sat here.

"Good morning, Sir Kay," said Lady Gwendolyn gaily, a finger offered as a perch while her other hand went to the dish of fruits.

"Good morning, ladyship," returned the parrot, beginning to fluff feathers.

The girl turned back to Tremaine, grave again.

"But," she said anxiously, "we shall come back here after a while? Oh, I could not bear to leave it forever and ever. This is home, you see, Mr. Bill."

Chapter XIV

pearls!

"YOU must have a sleep, Mr. Bill. You must be wearied with all that you have endured!"

Tremaine roused himself from drowsy revery. Sleep? No doubt he was in sad need of it, yet how think of such a thing while there was so much to do? How slip out from under that responsibility which he felt was rightfully his? What was afoot now, down there along the shores of the lagoon? What about Tom Cleever, still awaiting his return?

He recalled Cleever's significant words at parting; he would wait "a reasonable length of time."

"Have you any windows that look down upon the camps where the men are?" he asked.

Nodding brightly, eager to show him, she sprang up and led the way. Through a long, dark and very narrow hallway, a chill passage which might have led into the bowels of some ancient castle, they came presently into a dimly lighted chamber. Here his guide cautioned him to silence with a look and a gesture, pointing upward, and he understood that this place was directly under the tower where Wire kept a lookout. She ran forward noiselessly, pushed a curtain aside from a tall, narrow window and let the daylight rush in. The first thing Tremaine saw clearly was her own dainty self, a brown finger laid warningly across her red lips.

Next he marked curiously the room's appointments; a library table, easy chairs, a divan; on the walls everywhere large maps; near the windows, a telescope, flanking the telescope, a globe. She was swinging the telescope about, focusing it. With her quick bright smile she stepped back, inviting him forward.

It was an excellent instrument and through its powerful lenses distant objects appeared to leap toward him. He saw Captain Wire's schooner distinctly and in detail, read the letters of her name, made out the two men on board fore and aft, each carrying a rifle. He saw, too, the guns mounted on the open jaws of the break in the reef; the man by each gun; the rowboats swinging idly at their hawsers' ends. Then Captain Wire's camp, all but deserted just now.

But all this held but the first sweeping glance; he was anxious to find his own party. Ah, there she lay, the little *King Kamehameha,* looking bright and pretty, spick-and-span at this distance, idle white canvas mirrored in the glassy lagoon. A figure stirred on board; came forward, stood looking ashore. It was Tom Cleever. Tremaine fancied he could see the look on the man's face! So near, despite the three miles separating them, that he felt almost as though he could call out to Cleever, "All's well; stick by your guns, old man!" and he heard.

"Now," mused Tremaine with a degree of content, "if I am to be out of all scrimmage for some few hours, I'm in luck to have a place like this to hole-up in. At least I can watch all that happens and, with good luck, I'll have some tidings to carry back to the boys when I can rejoin them."

Meanwhile an overtaxed and battered body insisted upon rest. When Lady

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Gwendolyn, seeing how pale and haggard he was, told him that he would find greater comfort in the large airy room which had been her father's, he asked if instead he might remain here. Oh, here was comfort enough, after all he had experienced of late! He'd sleep, all right; in a big chair, on the divan—standing straight up! If he might spend the day here he'd doze and wake, coming between dozes to the window to keep in touch with whatever happened.

So in a little while she left him, withdrawing reluctantly, pausing at the doorway to smile back at him, herself in need of sleep since for her as for him last night had been one of trial and sleeplessness. He watched her go, came back for another long look through the telescope and then lowered himself gingerly upon the divan. And, after a long while, his thoughts darting in a thousand directions, having to do with her, with Dale-Stretton, with Wire and Challoner and Tom Cleever and Ned Burlock—with her again, most and last of all—he fell asleep.

He awoke during the mid-afternoon, floundered hastily to his feet forgetful of his arm until a sharp pain reminded him of it and everything, and returned to his telescope. Under a glowing sun in a clear sky the little island seemed asleep. He saw no sign of movement either upon the deck of the *Lucky Lady* or of the *King Kamehameha;* not so much as a column of smoke stirred to mark either camp. No sound reached him, but the noises of the circling sea birds and the distant booming of the surf against the reef. Had it not been for the white sails

down there in the lagoon he would have thought the island deserted.

He turned to see his hostess, looking sleepy-eyed, standing in the doorway. She had been dozing, too, doubtless, but so lightly that she had heard him stirring about.

Together they stood a long while, searching on all hands for some sign of life. Nothing. No wind blew; hardly a tree rustled; in the golden sunlight rugged lands and green valley drowsed. If men moved about anywhere it was in hiding upon the forested slopes.

The greater part of what was left of the long quiet day they spent together. Returning to that cozier apartment which the girl called her boudoir, idling in easy chairs, nibbling at the fruit heaped on the table between them, Tremaine smoking now and then when he did not forget to keep the fire burning in his pipe bowl, much to Lady Gwendolyn's absorbed interest, they found the placid hours flowing fast enough. One day was all too short for them to ask a tithe of the questions which rose to the lips of both. Not alone was there much in the present to be told; behind each lay years of such life as the other had no knowledge of. A girl's existence, all alone, upon a little lost isle in the remote seas, a man's going up and down among other men, through great cities, in foreign strands among strange peoples.

They went frequently to the telescope; the island remained asleep, seeming untenanted. She looked long and earnestly at the two little vessels; she marvelled that so many men should have come to her island. What was it that brought them? What was it that brought Bill Tremaine to her?

So they came to the tale of the pearls. Tremaine was not sure that the time was ripe to speak of her father and so made no mention of having bought the island; but he told her at length the rumor which had gone abroad of rare and lovely pearls found here and of how he had come to see if any truth lay in the story; and how Captain Wire, having heard it also, had rushed on ahead. He told her what Crazy Jake had said; he concluded with the admission that as far as he, Billy Tremaine, knew all this might be but of the glamorous texture of pure fiction.

A sudden sparkle came into her eyes. She jumped up, crying gleefuly, "Is it really pearls you seek? Wait!"

She sped away and in a moment was back, carrying in both hands a cut-glass

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bowl which, in the dusk of the doorway through which she returned, gave him the fanciful impression of being filled with moonbeams. Flushed prettily in her eagerness, she set the bowl on the table in front of him—and Billy Tremaine sat back, stared at it and at her dancing eyes—and gasped in amazement.

"Pearls! A bowl full of pearls!"

She laughed gaily; she took up a handful of the glowing globules and let them sift slowly, like great drops of water distilled from a rainbow, through her fingers.

"I love them for their beauty, Mr. Bill Tremaine," she said softly. "They are like little moons. And," with a sudden gesture she shoved them toward him, "they are yours!"

"Mine?" It was his first startled thought that he had let out that he had bought the island; that he would claim everything he found upon it—which, by the way, might be stretched to include her.

But he was swift to understand; she but made him a little gift! As lightly as she had given him an orange, now she offered a royal ransom in pearls!

"No, no," he said hastily. "They are yours, Lady Gwendolyn! Every single one of them. And you must put them away safely, where they will not be seen by anyone. You don't understand? Well, you will later on."

All the while he was looking at her curiously. How little she knew in ways of worldly wisdom—or folly. What if she fell into the hands of a man like Captain Wire? Or Nick Challoner? Or Ned Burlock?

Then eyes and thoughts together drifted back to the pearls.

"Do you realize you have a fortune there? You must have been years acquiring them. They don't grow on the trees here, do they?"

For an hour he listened, fascinated, as in the phraseology she had acquired from much romantic reading, she told how the pearls had come from under the sea to their present place in a glass bowl on the table. She laughed at his puzzlement; for it brought a pucker to his brows as he followed her and formed mental pictures of the things she recounted. A girl all alone on the lonely white beaches, yet not always lonely herself as she listened to the voices of the ocean and lifted her own voice, singing wordlessly to the mighty accompaniment; a girl, all unafraid, as she swam in the tender blue of the lagoon, all unafraid as she dived deep, deeper, far, far down in the glassy translucency, making a game and a pastime of her seeking for the pretty trifles which she brought up with her.

But how had she known that there were such things as pearl oysters? What chance had led her to begin this search below the depths?

Oh, she had forgotten to tell him of that; of another man. He had been an islander, a little, ugly, dark man who long ago, while her Uncle Wiliam still dwelt here with her, had been washed to their shore from some wreck. She was a little girl when he came and not so very old when he had a bad fall from the cliffs and was killed. He had been like a fish, that islander. For hours he stayed in the water, swimming far out to seat at times, sporting in the lagoon, diving and staying under the surface so long each time that at first she was afraid he was never coming up. He had taught her all that he knew, swimming, floating, diving. He had brought up the first pearl-bearing shells and had been greatly excited at his discovery.

And to amuse herself during many a long sunny afternoon, she had gone down to the lagoon, all alone, and dived as he had showed her, bringing up the shells, finding now and then a pearl. And many and many a soft moonlight night she had visited the lagoon, a vague unrest upon her, to swim vigorously out to sea, to lie floating watching the few stars, to swim back to her own lagoon—to let herself sink deep down to the oyster beds, playing that pearls were

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fallen moonbeams and that at night time she would find the loveliest.

He sat silent, plunged into a queer revery. While during the years that were past he had gone up and down, with busy hours crammed to bursting, among gay parties, crowded lecture rooms, motor excursions, dinners and dances, all those affairs where eager youth brushed against other pulsating existences, she had amused herself alone, swimming far out to sea, communing with the mysteries of the star-studded firmament above and the fathomless depths below.

When she had done and he with an effort had pulled himself back to a matter-of-fact world, he strove to impress upon her that she must not show other men, as she had shown him, this shimmering, luminous result of her gleanings. For that bowl was brim-full of temptation and there was more than one man on the little island now who, Tremaine felt sure, would commit most of the crimes to come at such a prize. He told her how men hungered for such things.

"I know," she told him quietly. "Did I not often see the fires of covetousness in the little shrewd eyes of the island diver? Did not Uncle William tell me? Oh, I have known for a long time. And twice have I used that knowledge, trying to purchase my own freedom and safety at the cost of a few pearls."

And she explained Crazy Jake's "pearl bird's nest." It had been she who had placed the pearls in the sand where she was sure he must find them; for she hoped that, having them, he would find a way to return across the seas to the land whence he had come, and so leave her in peace. And, seeing Captain Wire's craft putting into port, she had done the same thing again; this time she had put half a dozen pearls where Captain Wire or his men could scarcely fail to find them—on a flat rock down by the beach. And Wire had found them himself; she had watched him, herself safe hidden in a grove on the mountainside.

Here was news, and of no welcome sort. For Captain Wire was not Crazy Jake and whereas Jake, holding the island bewitched, was glad to take what he could and risk the terrors of the open ocean rather than remain here, Captain Wire's mental processes were certain to be of a directly opposite order. He would know that only a human hand could have placed pearls where he found them; he would reason that if that hand had placed these here, it still might hold others back. He would be shrewd enough to sense that some strange condition of things lay behind so odd a happening; and, finally, he would set himself stubbornly to search every foot of the island in order to come at an explanation—and further pearls.

But of all this Tremaine said nothing. Here were pearls; here was a girl like a pearl; and down there on the beach were as hard a pack of men as ever hunted loot in any quarter of the world. Men, as he had seen, who stopped nowhere this side of murder or beyond, so that they might come at that which they coveted.

While he mused she watched him curiously. When he looked up he met her quick bright smile and had his thoughts shunted into other channels by her saying, "Your clothing has been spoiled in your adventurings, Mr. Bill. In your bedroom is a chest containing garments, brought ashore when my father ordered this castle built. With them are combs and brushes, too."

And a razor, too, as Tremaine was most grateful to find. Hard work he made of it, shaving with his good hand, but despite a scratch or two, he was satisfied with the result. After a change into fresh linen, dressed in white flannels, wearing a pair of Dale-Stretton's shoes, he returned to Lady Gwendolyn in her boudoir, and was rewarded with a look of bright approval. Then, together, they went again to the telescope.

He stared, rubbed his eyes, looked again. There, riding lightly at anchor, was the *Lucky Lady*. But—the *King Kamehameha* was gone!

(*To be continued in our next number*)

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TOM FENTRESS SMELLS POWDER AGAIN

By K. CARLETON UNTHANK

YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD COWHAND DOWN. TOM MIGHT HAVE SEEN ONE STAKE GO TO GLORY, BUT HERE'S THE STORY OF HOW HE GOT THE NEXT ONE—NOT WITHOUT SOME QUICK ACTION AND COWBOY LUCK

ALTHOUGH the fashionable Fostoria bar was crowded, still, just then, it was the loneliest place in the world to Tom Fentress. Tom's narrow-brimmed, high-crowned derby hat seemed grotesque in such a setting, likewise his short-tailed coat. The peg-top trousers which draped his narrow hips and slender legs, bowed by years in the saddle, completed the tale of just what a cowhand should not wear.

Broadway tailors at the start, and now at the end the curt announcement of his brokers that his funds were exhausted, had made of an erstwhile rider for the Arrow C something sad indeed to contemplate. One short year had done the trick.

Tom tossed off the contents of his glass and ordered another, giving an impatient shrug to shoulders so handicapped by the tailor's art, as he thought of how he might have owned a brand and ten thousand steers to wear it, instead of just the freakish clothes he stood in and the price of a ticket to Omaha. "But then," he told himself more cheerfully, "I didn't have nothin' a year ago when I bumped into that outcroppin' o' quartz, so why should I holler?"

Presently, he began to croon to himself:

"Beat the drums slowly
And play the fifes lowly,
For I'm only a young cowboy
And I know I've done wrong. . . ."

As he chanted his sorrows became more poignant, his voice rose unconsciously, and, keeping step with his anguish, was the increase in size of his audience from among the appreciative crowd.

"Are you really a cowboy?" presently asked one young fellow in evening clothes. "And can you ride a bucking horse, and throw a lasso?"

Tom's reply was to summon a bell-boy, and soon a hair rope, which had been neglected for one long year, was whirling in one great loop—a loop which rose slowly to the height of his shoulder one minute and then dropped just as slowly to a level with his knees the next, a loop which finally settled over the shoulders of a negro waiter carrying a tray——

A FEW days later, Tom reached Omaha minus trunk, minus saddle, minus bridle, minus everything, in fact,

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that he had owned save his precious rope, his two forty-fives, and the odd-looking clothes on his back.

He realized that a trip to the stockyards would probably net his free transportation westward—but at too much cost. He could stand anything but ridicule, so he gave that place a wide berth.

Moreover, he could not go back to the Arrow C. "Not either in this or in any other riggin'," he thought disgustedly. "The gang 'ud ride me too hard. First thing I've got to do is to ditch these yere dude clothes."

Accordingly, he visited a certain shop, and after considerable haggling, emerged into the sunshine of Farnham Street jingling two silver dollars in the pocket of a pair of overalls. A flannel shirt, somewhat motheaten, and an old felt hat and pair of heavy shoes were the other fruits of his dickering with the proprietor of the store.

In furtherance of his plan, which was now beginning to take shape, he next visited an employment agency and "shipped out" with a construction outfit. A few hours later, and a dollar poorer, the erstwhile cowhand was speeding westward over the B&M listening to the click, click of the smoker wheels pounding the joints between the rails, and musing ruefully.

"So I've got down to skinnin' mules," he thought lugubriously. "Well—" he drew a long breath "—mebbe I've learned my lesson—no use tryin' to beat the other feller's game."

READING a newspaper in the seat opposite to Tom was a plump little man dressed in worn overalls. "From the looks of him," thought Tom as he noted the fellow's dress and shabby telescope, "he must be a labor stiff. Wonder if he's shippin' to Reliance."

The fat little man presently turned a page, and, catching Tom's roving glance, smiled and spoke. "Shippin' out?" he asked, his mild blue eyes bright with friendliness.

Tom was lonely and welcomed the chance to make an acquaintance. "Yes," he replied, smiling himself. "I shipped out fer Reliance—Collins and O'Keefe outfit."

The little man chuckled. "That's funny," he said while moving over to Tom's seat. "I'm hittin' fer the same outfit myself." As he eased himself into the seat he extended his hand and added, "Name's Donley, Spike fer short."

"Mine's Fentress," replied Tom, "Tom Fentress," and, leaning forward, he flipped over the back of the seat ahead. With a sigh of relief, he stretched out his long legs. "Might as well be comfortable," he observed. "We got a long ride ahead o' us." He then looked at his hands, flexing the long and slender fingers. "I'll wear the hide off 'em the first day," he chuckled. "I ain't had holt o' a wheeler fer ten years. And Reliance ain't much o' a cow country——"

"I kinda thought you was a cowhand," broke in Spike. "When you blew in the employment office I noticed yer walk in partic'lar—an' thought then you'd orter had on high-heeled boots. Figgered that you'd brought a shipment to Omaha an' got left behind."

Tom had been aching for days to meet some sympathetic soul in whom he could confide his troubles, and forthwith proceeded to tell the whole tale, from his days on the Arrow C prior to his quartz discovery and sale of the mine up to and including the final windup of his attempt to beat the bucket shops.

"So," he wound up disgustedly, "I shipped out in the hopes of makin' a little stake——"

WITH this confidence of Tom's as a beginning, the two were soon upon the friendliest of terms. Tom gathered, from Spike's rather vague description of his wanderings, that the moon-faced little fellow had spent most of his fifty years of life drifting about from one laboring job to another with nothing to look forward to save an occasional spree; and his heart went out to one whose outlook was so hopeless. "Just wait, Spike," said he, along toward the end of the little fellow's tale, "till I get me a ranch—then you kin come an' putter around an' not need to worry 'bout yore old age."

There was a twinkle in the mild blue eyes of Spike as he digested this, and

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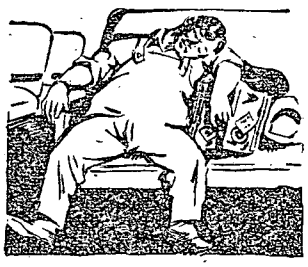
there was a mixture of both earnestness and lightness in his acceptance of it. "Thanks, Tom," he said, "I'll remember. When y'u git yer ranch, an' I ain't able to handle a pick and shovel anymore, I'll look ye up." He then returned to his own seat; and, after tossing Tom the paper which he had been reading, pillowed his head on his battered telescope; and was soon fast asleep.



Casually Tom picked up the paper and just as casually started to glance over the headlines. One news item headed "Bank Robbery," caught his interest. It appeared, from the account in the paper, that a band of five masked men had held up the Stock Growers' Bank of Reliance the day before and cleaned out the vault. "Things must be right lively around the sandhill country," thought Tom when he finished reading the account of the robbery. "Gosh!" he thought sleepily, "I'd like to cop that reward—it'd fix me up nice and pretty." And he dozed off to sleep.

Tom was a light sleeper and consequently the touch of a hand softly cruising around in the vicinity of his hip pockets, so conveniently near the aisle, aroused him. He started, opened his eyes, and struggled to a sitting posture. At his first move, a big, heavy-bodied man who had city tough written all over his repulsive red face and who had paused at that particular place in the aisle, apparently for the purpose of recovering something which he had dropped on the floor, straightened up and proceeded toward his seat, near the front of the car.

GLANCING over at Spike, Tom caught an amused glint in the sleepy blue eyes that were gazing into his, and winked.

One of Spike's eyes closed ever so slightly, and he whispered, "That's Bledsoe. He's goin' same place we are. I saw him fannin' yer pockets——"

"The dirty skunk," exploded Tom, starting up, "I'll——"

"Wait, Tom," advised Spike. "It won't do any good to start anything here; you'd only get the worst of it—better fergit it now and go back to sleep."

The force of Spike's argument struck home, and Tom was soon asleep again.

ABOUT noon the next day the train pulled into Reliance, and Tom got his first glimpse of the metropolis of the sandhill country. Not that it was much of a city, for one street lined with one-story frame buildings, with false fronts, comprised the business center; but then it looked good to Tom—after his year in New York.

In the nearest saloon, where he and Spike repaired immediately, Tom learned that the Collins and O'Keefe outfit was grading about twenty miles due south of town, and that one of their wagons was then standing in front of Cushman's store, down the street a few doors. Thence they proceeded, and found the team ready to start for camp. As Tom piled in beside Spike, he noticed that among the four other men in the wagon was Bledsoe, sitting on the straw covered floor just behind him.

The essence of the conversation at the bar where he and Spike had tarried for a while had been the robbery. And Tom had learned that the bandits has disappeared in the sandhills, a dreary waste of sand dunes and tumble weeds which extended for more than fifty miles in every direction.

But his immediate problems drove all thought of the robbery from Tom's mind. There was, for example, the jolting which he, in company with the other unfortunates in the wagon, had to endure as the team of fractious mules sped southward. This jolting of the springless wagon, together with the heat of the blazing sun which beat down upon their unprotected heads, soon reduced the passengers to perspiring bundles of swearing misery.

"Ain't there any trees in this blamed country?" plaintively asked Spike after a time.

"Shut yer trap," snarled Bledsoe, "or I'll shut it fer ye."

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"Ye will, Bledsoe, will ye?" spluttered Spike. "I'll——"

A ham-like hand reached forward and closed over the little man's mouth, and the bully sneered, "Ye little runt, I've a mind to——"

But he did not finish his threat. Although Tom was miserable himself, his heart had gone out to the hopeless-looking little man who had tried to befriend him. Consequently, when the bully made his move, Tom made one too, remembering Bledsoe's attempt to rob him. His slender hand, white and soft after a year's inaction but nevertheless still a pliant bundle of spun steel, reached over and closed about the bully's wrist.

"Lay off him," said Tom evenly, his dark brown eyes glittering with sudden menace. "If you're spoilin' fer a fight, stranger, I'll take you on—" Here he raised his voice. "Driver, stop the team!"

BEFORE the mules had come to a full stop the two furious men were rolling over and over in the sand among the tumble weeds and presently were staging a fight wherein Tom's muscle was telling against the huge bulk of the bully.

"Look out, Tom," yelled Spike, who had, in company with the other occupants of the wagon, leaped to the ground and was dancing around yelling encouragement to his champion, "he's pullin' a gun."

But Tom needed no warning. The instant that the bull dog revolver appeared in Bledsoe's hand, Tom kicked it from his grasp, grappled with the wildly cursing man, bore him to the ground, and choked him into abject submission.

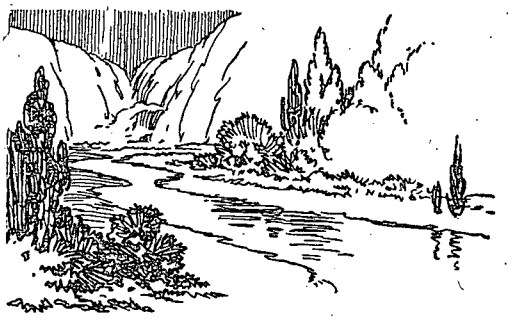
He then rose to his feet, recovered the revolver, and said to the prostrate man, "Git up! And if I hear another peep out o' y'u, I'll bore y'u."

Without a word Bledsoe scrambled to his feet and slunk to the wagon.

Spike was grateful to Tom for befriending him, and made no effort to conceal his gratitude. Moreover, he was talkative; so by the time the hot and weary travelers crawled from the wagon bed at the entrance to the commissary tent, Tom knew just about what to expect in a grading camp.

In a narrow little gully among the dunes were pitched the tents of the camp, where a hundred men and twice as many animals —mostly mules—ate and slept and had their being.

Ten or a dozen large wall tents, furnished with rude plank bunks for which the men themselves had to provide the bedding, sheltered the skinners—as laborers and drivers alike were called. Several much larger tents stabled the animals. A still larger tent was the combined dining room and kitchen. All water used in the



camp was hauled from a small creek which flowed by the camp at a distance of about one mile.

It was a cheerless place, and blazing hot, for there were no trees in the vicinity of the camp, but Tom decided to make the best of it. "I've got to," he thought grimly, after making his survey, "stick her out till I can make a stake."

A SHORT, labored interview with the commissary clerk netted him a pair of cotton blankets, nothing more. The fellow was adamant. "When you work a few days," said the clerk, during the course of the interview, "and get a little money coming, you can draw some tobacco, but not before."

But it developed that Tom had cast bread upon the waters when he befriended Spike. For, after supper, that grateful little mortal produced a sack of tobacco and book of papers, tendering the same to his benefactor. So Tom had his after supper smoke.

In the same tent with Spike and Tom, were eight other men, among whom was Bledsoe. This worthy seemed to nurse no grudge against Tom for humiliating him, but Spike caught a baleful glance or two

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cast in his new-found friend's direction, and warned Tom accordingly.

"Pard," he whispered, when he had the chance, "better look out fer Bledsoe; he's a bad one—done time oncet fer stabbin' a man. I heard about it in Omaha."

Tom glared at Bledsoe, who was making up his bunk. "Thanks, Spike," he said under his breath. "I'll keep my eye peeled, but I ain't worryin'."

The next day, however, Tom had cause to thank his lucky star, besides poor Spike, for a narrow escape.

BLEDSOE, who, it appeared, was an experienced grader, was dumping wheelers; Tom was driving one of the half dozen teams which were under his direction. Once, during the morning, as he urged his team of flea-bitten mules to the edge of the steep embankment, he noticed a large boulder resting precariously on the very edge. With a wave of his hand, Bledsoe indicated the spot where he wished Tom's load dumped, and which was close by the boulder. When the mules cleared the edge of the embankment, and started to slide and stumble to the bottom with Tom clinging to the reins, he glanced back over his shoulder. He did it almost unconsciously; and the odd position of the boulder, which should have been lying at the foot of the embankment, the warning which he had received the night before—both factors, linked together, might have caused this act of caution.

At any rate, he looked back; and did it just in time. Only the lightning quickness with which he leaped to one side saved him from being killed or badly maimed by the boulder which was crashing down the steep declivity in his wake.

"Look out," yelled Bledsoe, from the top of the bank. But it was plain to Tom that the warning had been given only as a means of covering up.

Tom realized that it would do no good to try and fasten anything on Bledsoe—the thing was too well planned—but after supper, while sitting on the bench in front of the tent smoking a cigarette with Spike, Tom mentioned the boulder incident. He also expressed curiosity about the present whereabouts of Bledsoe, who had disappeared immediately after the day's work was over, not waiting, apparently, even for his supper.

"The ornery devil's gone to Rodman's Springs," said Spike, when Tom finished his tale. "Heard him tell Slade (one of the other men in the tent) that he was goin' to wash the alkali out o' his throat with a gallon or two o' suds. He took his gun with him too; you was a chump to give it back to him, Tom."

RODMAN'S SPRINGS, as Tom had heard, was the name given to the tent city which had sprung up mushroom like, in the vicinity of the water hole on Rodman's ranch and which lay some three miles distant from the camp.

Grading camps, similar in every respect to that of Collins and O'Keefe, were scattered along the fifty mile stretch of railroad being constructed from Reliance to Bidwell, on the U. P.; and the tent city at Rodman's ranch was only one of many similar ones which offered a dubious kind of entertainment to the thousands of men working in the different camps.

"Let's draw some pay next Sunday," presently suggested Spike, "an' take a look at that dump ourselves. My throat'll be dry as a bone by then—cain't hardly swaller right now."

"I'm on," said Tom. "I might pick up a few dollars in a draw game. I'm real modest, I am, but they ain't any hombres ridin' this range that's got me beat when it comes to judgin' cairds."

The following Sunday morning, after drawing a few dollars each from the reluctant commissary clerk, Tom and Spike trudged through the sand to Rodman's Springs.

Three large tents, and a number of smaller ones, housed the three make-shift saloons, and gamblers and hangers-on attached to each.

Tied to the hitch-rack in front of the largest tent were three horses, one of which was a splendid blood bay, with four white stockings. Tom loved horseflesh; so he paused for a moment to fondle the velvet muzzle of the bay before entering the tent.

The place was crowded. Back of the

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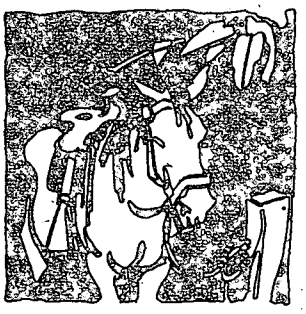
long bar made of two by twelves, planed smooth, which extended clear across the back of the tent, were only two bartenders where there should have been three or four. Scattered over the sanded floor of heavy planking, were a number of tables where poker games were in progress. At one end of the room was a crap table; and at the other end of the soft white fingers of a faro dealer were sliding cards from the box.



"Spike," said Tom, after finishing his beer, "I'm goin' to try an' make a pass or two—might get enough to buy a stack in one of these triflin' draw games."

"Shoot a dollar fer me while you're at it," replied Spike, whose bright blue eyes were darting here and there about the room. Tom found himself noticing that for one fleeting moment he lost the hopeless, helpless look which had gained Tom's sympathy when they first met.

LUCK was with Tom, for he made three passes, letting the original bet of two dollars ride. Turning to Spike, he said, "If you don't mind, pard, I'll invest these yere sixteen dollars in a draw game."

"Play 'em close to you're belly," advised Spike. "I'm goin' to take a peek around the other joints."

Nature—using the term in its broadest sense—occasionally makes an odd mistake. She endows, for example, some poor soul that really needs the money with a streak of unbeatable luck. This appeared to be one of those extremely rare occasions, for Tom's original stack of whites, which he presently purchased, grew by leaps and bounds.

He had taken a vacant seat at one of the draw games, after taking a look at all four games going, and this one had seemed to be "the least cluttered up with house men." Before calling for a stack, Tom had watched the play for a few minutes, and had attempted to classify the players. Two, he had decided, were mule skinners like himself. One of the balance was a professional gambler, unquestionably. The other three players were dressed like ranchers, in flannel shirts, broad-brimmed, high-crowned hats and corduroy trousers, which were tucked in high-heeled boots. Forty-fives peeped from low-slung holsters at their hips.

The game was all jacks, table stakes, with a quarter edge—one white chip—and, as it was seven handed, the usual opening bet was two dollars. The joker played as an ace of any color—that is, it would fill a flush and a pair with an ace. Straights had to be pat.

TOM'S luck was phenomenal. Inside of an hour he almost had the game corraled, and was thinking of cashing in, but decided to play one more round. At the time, he was in front of the gun. One of the mule skinners dealt the cards and Tom passed blind.

The rancher on Tom's left shoved in two red chips and said wearily, "'Tain't much use, but I might as well crack it." Nodding toward Tom, he added, "This yere bird'll cop it, like he's done all the rest I've opened."

Tom then skinned his hand, holding it close to his breast, and his heart gave an extra throb.

The next man shoved in two dollars, reluctantly. "Gents," he protested. "I sure hate to fatten it up fer someone else, but I cain't stay out."

Directly opposite to Tom sat the player who had the largest stack, besides Tom's own. He threw in two blue chips, thus making it ten dollars to play, and did it without making any comment whatever. As a matter of fact, he had hardly spoken during the whole time that Tom had been playing. For this reason, if for no other, Tom had studied him covertly. The man's silence was unusual; likewise his appearance and bearing. Although his face was tanned, it was the two weeks at the seashore variety—not the result of years of exposure to sun and wind. His face was thin, his nose hawk-like, and his eyes of icy-blue were oddly piercing. On the whole, Tom had decided that he would

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much prefer to have him for a friend than for an enemy.

The other players on Tom's right passed.

It was now up to Tom. He immediately pushed in a stack of reds, making it twenty dollars to pay. "'Tain't often," he said "I pass blind and ever have more'n a pair of deuces if it's opened."

"Ain't that hell, now?" grumbled the opener as he showed two queens and threw them disgustedly away. "I knew it when I opened."

"This yere bob-tailed flush o' mine," said the next man convincingly, as he threw his hand in the discard, "wouldn't be worth a tinker's dam if I'd 'a' made it."

THE silent man coolly counted the stack of reds which Tom had shoved in, tossed in eight red chips, thus covering the raise; and then, still silent, proceeded to count, using thumb, fore and middle fingers of his right hand, the balance of the chips in front of him. "I tap myself," he said, and then added, "If you want to take the lid off, stranger, I've got a horse tied outside that I'll put up for one fifty more," and he looked at Tom questioningly.

"Which one is it?" asked Tom.

"Blood bay, four white stockings."

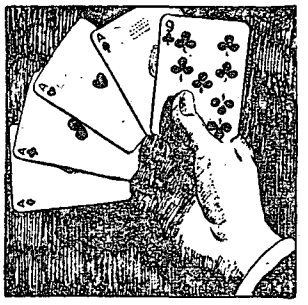
"Saddle and bridle included?"

"Certainly," and a half smile hovered over the tight-lipped mouth of the silent man.

"You're on," chuckled Tom, and counted out the chips to cover the raise, which took about all that he had. "I shore need a hoss."

"Cards," called the dealer.

"Stranger," said Tom, "afore we draws cards, let me ask y'u what's the high hand in this yere game?"



"Four aces," replied the silent one.

"I've got 'em," chortled Tom, "so 'tain't no use to draw cairds. Lead me to that hoss!"

The loser threw his hand in the deck without a word, stood silently by while Tom was cashing in his chips; and then led the way to the hitch-rack. While Tom was admiring the splendid points of his new mount, the silent man made one remark, and one only. He said softly, "Always look a gift horse in the mouth."

Tom wondered what he meant by such an enigmatical remark, especially after a close examination disclosed no blemishes whatever, and that the horse was five years old.

Tom was now sitting pretty; he had a stake; he had a number one mount. All he lacked now was proper clothes, and he decided to attend to that matter as soon as possible.

Spike meanwhile had disappeared. As a matter of fact, Tom had not seen him since before sitting in at the poker game. Bubbling over with joy at his good fortune, Tom eagerly searched the three saloons for his friend and pardner, but could find no trace of him. "Guess he got tired o' waitin'," thought he, "an' went back to camp." He then mounted and rode rapidly toward camp himself.

MEANWHILE, the silent man and the other two men dressed as ranchers were having a confidential chat at one end of the bar.

"Silent Jim," presently asked one of the men, "what kind of a hand did that skinner's four aces beat for you?"

"Four tens," shortly replied the man known as Silent Jim. He deftly rolled a cigarette with one hand, lit it, and added, "He's no skinner, Marty."

"He ain't no dick, that's a cinch," offered the third man in the group, "I'd gamble on that."

"Cowhand," said Silent Jim, and chuckled a little. At this rare exhibition of levity, both Marty and the other man, whose name was Farlow, looked at him in amazement. "Right now," he continued, "he's draggin' a herring by the tail, instead of a steer by the horns." And after making this remark the silent one chuckled again.

"I see what you mean," laughed Marty, "he'll hit the trail fer Reliance now, ridin' that hoss, to blow in his winnin's."

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"Right," said Silent Jim, "and while they're rounding up that lucky cowhand, we'll hit the trail for Tony's." He seemed to ponder matters for a moment, then, "As soon as Bledsoe shows up, we'll start."

BY TWO o'clock in the afternoon, Tom was headed for Reliance. He had been unable to find Spike, either at Rodman's Springs or at the camp; so he had left the little man's share of the winnings with the commissary clerk and word with one of their tent mates for Spike to follow him to town.

The bay was a splendid animal, and Tom enjoyed every foot of the twenty-odd miles to town. Lolling back in the great Spanish saddle, reins loosely held in his left hand, which rested lightly on the high-arched pommel, his right hand either resting on lean thigh or rolling a cigarette, Tom's thoughts were pleasant and his plans many.

The blazing sun of the sandhill country was still beating down upon the dusty main street of Reliance—though from quite an angle—when the blood bay cantered up to the hitchrack in front of Maynard's saloon. The street was deserted, save for a dog or two lolling around in the shade of the blacksmith shop and lazily hunting fleas; a few teams standing in front of the two general stores, indicating that they were open for business; the many horses stamping, kicking, biting, both at flies and at each other, at the hitchracks in front of the five saloons; a buckboard standing in front of the bank—and one lone deputy, who was the only human being in sight, sitting in a tilted chair on the small front porch of the little jail. A spark of interest glowed in this individual's sleepy eyes when Tom dismounted from the blood bay.

In less than fifteen minutes, Tom was a range rider again—in everything save having a brand to claim. A twelve quart Stetson, with porch-like brim, covered his crisp brown hair. His flannel shirt was blue, and the neckerchief knotted about his throat was silk, and dark maroon in color. Luckily the storekeeper's stock of boots had been large and varied so Tom's feet and calves now rejoiced. And the chaps partly masking his neat blue trousers of corduroy were the best that money could buy. His two forty-fives were cleaned, well oiled and loaded and now peeped from low-slung holsters. Tom was set.

"I got a hoss," he said to himself happily, as he dallied with another beer; "I got proper clothes. I got some jack. Now all I need's a job; so why should I worry?" Nor was he worrying—just then.

Being socially inclined, and also having been deprived of the society of his kind for more than a year—which made him yet more eager for companionship—Tom managed, without much effort, to insinuate himself into the midst of a hilarious crowd of cowhands in Maynard's saloon. One of them explained that they were, "Ridin' fer the Double Y."

"Fellers," Tom presently said, gaining the floor by buying a round of drinks, "it shore does me good to meet up with a bunch o' he men again. Fer more'n a year I been messin' around with a bunch o' dudes, prancin' up an' down Broadway. Never again, says I——"

A BIG man wearing a star had been edging along the bar as Tom spoke his mind. He now interrupted. "So," he said softly, at Tom's elbow, "you don't belong around these parts?"

"No, Sheriff," replied Tom, giving the officer the benefit of the doubt. "I just blew in."

The big man was lightning quick. Both great arms clasped Tom's slender body with a bear-like hug, pinning his arms to his sides. "Take his guns, Bill," he said quietly to the man just behind him, and in a few minutes Tom was behind the bars of the little jail, wondering what it was all about, for no explanations had been vouchsafed him.

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Within an hour, however, he was out again, mulling over the inexplicable speed with which his release had been accomplished and the vague explanations of Sheriff Walling. The sheriff had said, when releasing Tom, "Just a mistake, young feller. You come ridin' into town on the same hoss that loped off a few days ago carryin' the boss of the gang that held up the bank, so I had to look y'u over." And despite Tom's questioning as to how his innocence had been established, he was none the wiser. The sheriff had laughed and replied, "That's just one of my official secrets."

Tom now knew, of course, that the man from whom he had won the horse was the leader of the band of robbers, and surmised that the other two men dressed as ranchers, who had appeared to be friends of the silent man, belonged to the gang. During the course of his short talk with the sheriff, he had, of course, explained where and how he had obtained the horse, and the sheriff had intimated that a posse would leave immediately for Rodman's Springs.

"I'm goin' after a slice of that reward myself," thought Tom, as he mounted the bay—which he had named "Dude," as a sort of constant reminder of past events—and cantered out of town in the direction of camp. It appeared to Tom that the posse, which had left a few minutes before, would probably find that the birds had flown. "Them fellers," thought he in this connection, "are much too wise to get caught nappin'." Then he thought of the remark which the silent man had made relative to looking a gift horse in the mouth. "I know now what he meant," he chuckled to himself. "He knew they'd pick me up's soon's I got to town. He was plannin' right then to beat it to some other joint. No wonder he let the hoss go so nice and easy; he was a dead give away."

SPIKE was not in camp, nor did anyone there seem to know where the little man had gone. He had simply disappeared, not even calling for his time, and the envelope containing his share of Tom's winnings was still in the hands of the clerk. Tom did learn, however, that the O'Keefe buckboard, driven by the big boss himself, had been gone since shortly before noon; but, of course, he gave the matter little thought.

Tom had reached camp just about dusk. As Dude had covered nearly fifty miles that day, he fed the tired animal and rubbed him down, deciding to let him rest for a couple of hours before starting on the trail of the bandits.

About ten o'clock, Tom left, and rode away in the direction of Rodman's Springs. Upon his arrival there, a little judicious questioning netted him the information that the posse had been there and gone, and that the silent man and his two companions had left hours before.

From the professional gambler who had banked the poker game where Tom had made his winnings, and who, it appeared, had no suspicion of the character of the men under discussion, he learned that one of the men he was after had dropped a word or two about Tony's. Tony's, it developed, was the name of another nest of saloons and gambling joints lying some ten miles south.

"That's my only lead," thought Tom as he stepped out into the darkness of a cloudy night, "so I'd better foller it."

Although it was very dark, Tom managed to follow the trail made by the freighters serving the various places like Rodman's Springs which were scattered here and there along the whole line of construction camps.

Presently, he came to a small creek, glowing through a dense growth of cottonwoods, and let Dude nose around a while in the cool water. He was just about to urge the reluctant animal up the farther bank, when he heard the neigh of a horse, coming, apparently, from a short distance down the trail.

"Guess I'll wait an' see who's abroad this time o' night," thought Tom, and he eased Dude deeper into the shadows.

In a few moments five horsemen filed slowly down the bank. After letting their mounts drink, they moved in single file down the creek bed, horses splashing through the shallow water.

Although it was too dark for Tom to recognize any of the riders, and although

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no word was spoken, save one low-toned command, given by one of the men after the horses were through drinking, still Tom felt, somehow, that here was his quarry. Waiting, therefore, until the little band of horsemen had gained about a hundred yards start, Tom followed, stopping Dude every few yards to listen. "Their own splashin'," thought he wisely, "will keep 'em from hearin' Dude; an' when they leave the crick, I'll know it."

The sound of splashing grew fainter and fainter, as Dude dropped farther and farther behind—the result of stopping every few yards for Tom to listen. Finally, it ceased altogether, and Tom knew that the band had left the creek bed.

Accordingly, he stopped Dude; and, tying him securely to a tree, cautiously made his way down stream, wading carefully through the shallow water. He had no plan of action. Five men against one were too great odds to tinker with, and well he knew it. All he had in mind, just then, was to maintain contact with the band.

Naturally, he did not know, that even as he had followed the five, another horseman had followed in *his* wake, stopping when he stopped, listening when he listened, but totally unaware of his presence.

Some distance down the creek, Tom discovered the point where the horsemen had left the bed of the stream. A light gleaming through the thick growth had given him the cue. Cautiously he made his way toward the light, and presently discovered a small shanty. He heard voices and the restless movements of horses tied among the trees.

"Now what'll I do?" thought Tom, when he discovered the shack. "I'll try to get a peek anyway," he decided, and made his way carefully in the direction of the window through which the light was shining.

A moment later, he was watching a group of five men gathered about a rude table in the center of the one small room which the shack afforded. In the group he recognized the silent man, and two other men—the remaining two were strangers.

Tom's quick eyes took in the situation. Here were five unsuspecting men gathered in a compact little group in the center of a small room into which opened a single door—and the door was open. Moreover, they were very much interested in watching the silent man divide into five piles a sack of currency which he had dumped in the center of the table. "Must be the loot," thought Tom. "They're so darned interested, it's worth a chance."

Accordingly, he slipped around to the open door, his boots making no sound in the soft sand. Guns in hands, he stepped softly over the threshold.

"Hist yore hands, gents," he said evenly.

As one man the five looked toward the door and, still as one man, they reached for the ceiling. For one fleeting moment Tom sensed the unusual, then something hard and unyielding pressed against the small of his back, and a voice which he remembered commanded, "Drop your guns."

The voice was Bledsoe's and for one dazed moment Tom thought that he was dreaming. This worthy had been sitting on a cracker box in the dark corner by the door, and thus out of Tom's line of sight both when he peeped through the window, and later when he entered the door. Now he was pressing an ugly bull dog revolver against Tom's back.

But hardly before the words were out of Bledsoe's mouth, and while Tom's tense fingers still clutched his guns, another voice spoke up—a voice which seemed so like, and yet so unlike, one that he knew, that Tom felt sure that he *must* be dreaming.

"Hold it," said a voice, and the tone was deadly earnest. Then Spike stepped lightly through the door—but it was a different looking Spike from the helpless little man that Tom had known.

Some inner sense, some dormant brain cell coming happily to life, guided Tom's next move. At the sound of Spike's voice, the silent man had dropped his hands, and

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quick as the strike of an adder his gun spoke; but Tom's forty-five barked first, by the bat of an eyelid only. Silent Jim's shot just grazed Spike's rosy cheek, while the bandit leader slowly crumpled to the floor, shot through the breast.

"That's one more obligation I'm under, Tom," said the man known as Spike, as he took Bledsoe's gun, and then went on, "Keep them covered while I tie these beauties up."

YOU shore had me fooled," said Tom some time later, "I never dreamed that you was a detective. An' you say that the Bankers Association sent you out from Omaha to——?"

"Yes, Tom," laughed William Martin, kingpin of the Martin Agency, "one hour after the job was pulled off I was hanging around the employment agencies looking for a chance to ship out to Reliance. Your sympathy almost killed me sometimes. It'll take three weeks to grow some new hide on the palms of my hands. But the reward will help cure them. And, Tom, my boy, your share ought to put you in the way of owning a brand."

"One thing's botherin' me, Mr. Martin," presently observed Tom, "an' that is—how'd that sheriff happen to turn me loose so quick?"

"I was in town," laughingly replied Mr. Martin. "Had driven in with O'Keefe in his buckboard, and I tipped off the sheriff that you wasn't his man. I told him not to give me away."

"Another thing," persisted Tom, "that ornery Bledsoe—how'd he come to be mixed up in the deal?"

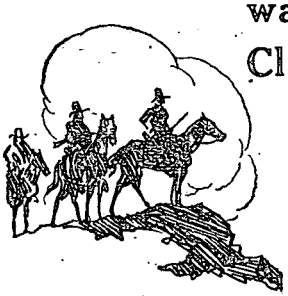
"Old member of Silent Jim's gang," replied the detective. "Think he came out from Omaha to join him—Jim'd only been out of Joliet for a month or so before he pulled off the bank job, and Bledsoe had probably only just got track of him. He met Silent Jim this afternoon, and had been hanging out in the shack all evening."

"Well," chuckled Tom, "when I get my ranch you'll have to come and putter around just the same."

"I sure will, Tom," replied the laughing detective, "and I won't wait either until I can't handle a pick or shovel."

In our next issue

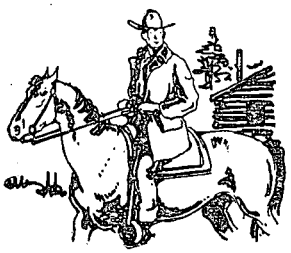
Rustlers, worked over brands, a bitter range war, a missing will—and these were only some of the troubles Sad Sontag walked into in the Cloudy River Country.



RUSTLER'S TRAIL

by

W. C. TUTTLE



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THE CODE

By WILL RYAN

THINGS LOOKED PRETTY ROUGH FOR STEVE RAND WHEN HE FOUND HIMSELF A PRISONER OF THE MOST EVIL LOOKING HOMBRES WHO EVER FORKED BRONCS. BUT YOU CAN'T PULL THAT STUFF AND GET AWAY WITH IT—NOT IN THE CATTLE COUNTRY

HE had no sooner turned into the canyon than he knew something was wrong. What it was, he could not decide. The trail was newly traveled, broad, and not particularly steep. The cool wind sweeping down through the thickets of alder and quaking-asp rustled the leaves softly. There were no other sounds but the distant call of a mountain jay, and the song of running water. Yet in every nerve of his body Steve Rand felt that queer sixth sense of danger, and he had lived in the open too many years to disregard its warning.

With a grunt of mild disgust he brought the sturdy bay gelding to a halt, swung one long leg up over the roll of the saddle, and settled himself to a careful scrutiny of the surrounding country, his blue eyes narrowed with thought.

Before him the rugged canyon, shadowy now in the late afternoon light, led into the heart of the Blues. On one hand the fringing growth of alder hid the foot of a steep talus slope like a giant mine dump; on the other, the exposed face of tilted rock strata stretched away in a broken gray wall until it was lost in the dark of the higher ridges. In the fissures of the wall stunted pines and squaw-berry bushes were growing. The trail itself lay through a grassy park, following the mountain creek which leaped and brawled and foamed over the bowlders of its narrow bed. Beyond, the trail climbed an outthrust shoulder of the talus slope; then it disappeared on its way to Tired Lady pass, high up there on the gray backbone above timberline. There was no movement of life anywhere on the broad sweep of the range.

Steve Rand shook his head, perplexed. "Dogone it, Tony," he muttered, "I sure feel somethin' funny here, and yet there ain't. That's reason enough why you and me'll act like there was. We'll make camp early, hawse."

He slid his foot back into the stirrup and caught up the reins. The bay raised its head from the mountain grass reluctantly, then, making up its mind to get the day's work over as soon as possible, took up the trail at a rapid running walk. Steve loosened the saddle gun in its sheath under his left knee, hitched the holster of his Colt a bit forward, and rode on, alert.

Up and down the trail climbed, sometimes bending abruptly upon itself, sometimes narrowed to a bare passageway between overhanging rocks, sometimes widening and growing faint as the canyon

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broadened into a green-carpeted park. In one of these Steve Rand drew rein just before sundown. There was abundant feed for the bay gelding; the rock wall gave protection to the east; plenty of dry wood littered the banks of the creek; and best of all, a tiny trickle from a fissure in the ledge filled a rock basin beneath it with clear spring water.

The bay gelding pawed the sod with one front hoof. "You're right, Tony," agreed his rider. "She's a right good-lookin' camp. I adds my vote to yours, and we stop right here."

But as he dismounted to free the cinch Steve shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. "Must be gettin' old!" he muttered. "Reg'lar Aunt Mary, feelin' spooky for no reason at all. Oh, well, we'll take a look 'round after supper; then we'll just forget it."

Out where the grass was heaviest he picketed his horse. Then he selected a cleared spot close to the rock wall, unrolled his light saddle pack, set out the battered frying pan and coffee pot, and last of all turned his attention to the building of a diminutive cook-fire. Ten minutes later he settled himself to eat, and as he satisfied his hunger he puzzled over the events of the day.

Even the cow-town into which he had ridden late in the morning had seemed queer. Too many loafers about the saloons for that time in the season. Too many saddle ponies bunched in the corral behind the Elk Horn feed barn. And his efforts to scrape acquaintance—as he looked back now he certainly had been given the cold shoulder. Nothing rough, but, come to think of it, mighty suspicious. The lanky, poverty-stricken homesteader at whose shack he had stopped to ask directions, he, too, had been mighty close mouthed. Steve recalled his parting words:

"But o' course, if yuhr plumb set on takin' that Tired Lady trail—— Wus I you, I'd sure go round by way o' Dickman. 'Tain't but a day's ride fudder nohow."

Steve rather wished that he had followed the man's advice.

What was Steve Rand doing there in that canyon of the Blues? To make a long story as short as possible, he had received his discharge from the Marines at the close of the Great War with a fervent resolve to settle down on the home ranch in southern Texas and never take another unnecessary step as long as he lived. The resolve had held good until his father's death, two years later. Then the cumulative effect of those months in the service had struck him full force. Steve developed a bad case of itching foot—that longing to go over the rim and find out what lies beyond. He sold off his best cattle, leased the ranch for a year, threw a saddle on his top-horse, and started north with the spring.

Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming—he had savored to the limit the freedom of the range rider who doesn't know where he is going, doesn't care where he is going, and doesn't expect to get there, anyhow. Steve was foot-free, twenty-four, clear of eye, sinewed like a plainsman. In the pocket of his coat, carefully wrapped in oilcloth, were his bank letter and his still more useful letter of introduction from his neighbor, Capt. Dutton of the Rangers, a letter which had brought him many new friends and much welcome entertainment along his devious route. Now, in Montana, for the first time in his trip Steve was worried.

When he knocked the last of the bacon grease into the embers of his fire, stood up and stretched himself, all the canyon was growing dark about him.

"Now for dishes," he soliloquized, "then a little look-see round, and then hit the hay. Only I'm sleepin' in the brush yonder, not near this fire. A man don't feel like I do for nothin'."

So saying, he gathered up his eating utensils and made his way down to the gravelly creek bed, where he rubbed them in the sand till they shone clean. He was kneeling over the rushing water when the faintest trace of a strange sound reached his ears, the sound a pebble might make under a careless foot. He looked up quickly, nerves crawling. But though he listened carefully, breathlessly, he heard nothing more; and he bent to his task again, convinced that his fears had played him a trick.

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When he next looked up, he saw the head and shouders of a man shadowed above the great bowlder on the opposite bank, and the glint of metal down the face of the bowlder could mean but one thing. Steve Rand was covered!

The hand which slid toward his Colt came to a sudden stop. An instant later it had joined its mate, as high above his head as he could reach. Slowly Steve rose to his feet, the empty coffee pot clattering on the stones beside him.

"Well," he said quietly, "I got 'em up, mister. What's the game, anyways?"

There was no answer. The dark figure across the creek held motionless. Were his senses playing him false? Steve repeated his question.

And then, even as he started forward, there came the quick swish of a rope; and the boy, jerked backward by an irresistible force, crashed down among the rocks in a stunning fall that sent great streamers of red flashing across the blackness of the distant slopes.

HIS head was wet, when he began to regain consciousness, wet and cold and aching terribly. There was a salty taste in his mouth, too; the taste of blood. He attempted to move, and groaned with pain. His arms were pinioned close to his sides by a constricting band that made breathing almost impossible. His eyes, opening, caught the flare of a match.

"He's comin' to!" said a voice. "Give 'im another hatful, Jake."

The sudden flood of icy cold water that sluiced over his face and chest brought him to a sitting posture, gasping. A hand thrust him roughly back.

"Don't be in no hurry, feller," said a second voice. "We got yuh where we wants yuh, an' we aims tuh keep yuh there. What's that letter say, huh?"

Another match had flared in the darkness. "He's the guy, all right," came the answer. "Looky here, Jake—Texas Ranger, he is. It's a letter from his cap'n. Yessuh he's the bird the chief wus worryin' over!"

Steve's head was clearing slowly. Yes, his coat was gone; and they had searched his pockets. Whoever had bound his arms had done a thorough job of it. Already the hard rope was cutting into his flesh. Dog-gone it, this was what comes of laughing off a danger hunch! Well——

He became aware that his captors were standing over him. A heavy boot drove into his ribs, and in words which left no doubt as to their meaning he was told to crawl up onto his especially condemned feet "an' git a-movin'."

Stumbling, hauled by the rope, driven forward by the heavy boot, Steve crawled up the bank and staggered toward the glowing embers of his fire. It was a trifle lighter there. He saw that his captors were roughly dressed, sturdy ruffians, in the broad hats of the range country. One, he thought, was bearded; the face of the other he could not make out.

Then the bearded one walked away, only to return shortly leading the bay gelding. Steve was pushed up into the saddle, and his feet were lashed together beneath the cinch.

"Now," they told him, "we're ridin'. An' y' better not try nothin' funny 'cause yuhr liable tuh git pulled plumb in two pieces. See!"

Then they, too, mounted; and one—Jake, Steve thought—caught the reins of the bay gelding, leading out into the darkness. The other rode in the rear, holding the loose end of the rope that bound the boy's arms. Soon Steve felt that they were climbing a steep gradient, back into the heart of the hills.

An hour passed, while the three rode in silence. He guessed that they were keeping to the main trail, for the footing seemed fairly easy, though they were continually twisting about, rubbing his knees against rocks or brushing through stiff pinegrowth. As he rode he worked at his bonds, hopefully at first, then with the dogged courage of despair. Not an inch of slack could he gain.

At last he knew by the sounds of the

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hoofs that he was in an open space. Then came an abrupt climb which suggested a side trail. The leader's horse nickered gently, and his rider, with an oath, jerked him to silence. Far ahead the yellow square of a window shone through the darkness.

Another quarter mile, on a trail that pitched slightly downward, and the leader raised his voice in a shout of warning.

"Hello, the house! Jake an' the Swede comin' with a prisoner!"

A door flung open, letting loose a flood of light by which Steve caught a quick impression of his surroundings. On his left a corral, in which saddle stock milled restlessly, led up to the very wall of a log building. Close by the wall a gate had been cut in the pole fence. On the right an open grass slope rose abruptly. Beyond, darkness. Now the bright oblong of the doorway was filled with crowding figures.

"Bring him in!"

"Let's see what yuh got, Jake!"

Men were pressing about him. They freed his feet, jerked him from the saddle,

and shoved him, reeling, across the threshold into the blinding glare of a dozen oil lamps. With the speed of one whose life depends upon it Steve took note of the interior.

It was a long, low room with a triple tier of bunks built almost the whole length of the farther side. Between the bunks and the end wall was a rough sink, and next to that a smoking cook stove at which a frowsy cook, his apron spotted with grease, stirred at a steaming kettle. Broken chairs—a card table littered with the pasteboards. Another long table, covered with a torn oil cloth, was set with heavy dishes, ready for a meal.

At the head of that table sat a man the sight of whom sent a chill of numb terror to Steve Rand's heart. His round head was hairless even to the absence of eyebrows, a lack which gave a strangely babyish expression to the pasty countenance, and the great body sunk in the wooden chair seemed heavy—without bony structure, flaccid like the body of a toad. He sat motionless now, apparently immersed in thought as the shouting, gesticulating mob pushed their captive before him. Then his cold, triangular eyes opened slowly as he fixed them on Steve's face.

"Here's the guy, Chief! We got 'im when he wus makin' camp. An' here's the letter which proves it."

Without reply the amorphous "chief" took the paper and read it with care, one stubby forefinger following along the written lines. At last he broke silence, in a voice as flat and cold as the speech of a sleepwalker.

"So you're the detective from the Cattle Association, are yuh? All right; get back on your job, you two. The rest of yuh, take this feller over the ridge an'—cut his throat for him. We don't bother to shoot spies."

Spies! Steve opened his mouth to shout his innocence. They were crazy! He had only—only— Then he realized the hopelessness of the task, and set his teeth.

From the throng that crowded about him came murmurs of approval, negatived only by a protest from the slovenly cook:

"Aw, Chief!" he whined. "I been a-holdin' back this mulligan two hours a'ready, waitin' till yuh got home. Leave him be till after supper, kain't yuh? I won't never get these dishes done, nohow."

For an instant the room fell strangely quiet, then the great bulk of the hairless leader sprawled forward upon the table, one dirty fist extended toward the offender; and even before the voice broke out in a bull-like roar of anger Steve sensed in the sudden shrinking back of those about him something of the terror which this man inspired in his followers.

"Jest one more crack like that, Scotty, an' there'll be two throats slit, 'stead o' one. What d'yuh mean, talkin' to me like that? If there warn't some sense in what yuh said I'd bump yuh off right now, myself. We'll eat first; and for buttin' in, Scotty, I appoints yuh to do the job when we're finished. Tie that son-of-a-gun to a bunk, somebody!"

There was a breath of evident relief as Steve was whirled about and thrown back

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against a bunk end. They kicked his feet from under him, sending him to the floor; then they bound him tight to the post.

"Come an' git it!" sang the cook.

Laughing, cursing, shoving one another in the horseplay of bravado, the strange company rushed for their seats at the long table. Soon they were feeding noisily.

Though he ached with pain in every nerve of his body Steve Rand's brain was working at high pressure. Lashed to the rough bunk, his arms bound to his sides, cramped by the awkward sitting posture, he thought desperately. In less than thirty minutes he was slated for death, yet somehow he no longer felt afraid. He had been in tight corners before! always there had been a way out. For the present he could do nothing, only wait, alert for any chance which might come.

He studied the dozen men seated about the long table. Without exception they were degenerates of the worst type—scum of the range, half-bloods, weaklings who had found knavery and gun play the easiest way of life, men who naturally attach themselves to an unscrupulous leader. Rustlers, stage robbers—worse, perhaps. No hope there.

As the table crossed one end of the room five of the men had their backs turned toward him. Steve had a feeling that the fact reduced his danger somewhat. The door by which he had entered was distant hardly twice his length. If he could only free himself there ought to be a chance, at least. He remembered stories in which captives had cut their bonds with broken glass—torn them apart with their teeth—burned them with flaming lamps. Not one of those devices was workable.

Minutes passed. It seemed to Steve that he could actually hear them, thundering in his ears. He almost laughed when he realized that the sound was the beating of his own pulse.

At the disordered table plates were being passed for a second helping, as the aproned cook scuffled busily about. Something in the carriage of that dirty, unshaven scoundrel seemed vaguely familiar. A chance resemblance, of course, Steve thought. He was leaning against the wall, now, with a callous grin on his scrubby lips. Steve caught his eye. The grin became wider. Almost physically sick with disgust Steve turned away his head; yet it was hard to avoid that evil face.

A moment later Steve again stole a glance. The cook had not moved from his place, he was still staring at his promised victim; but this time the boy saw his glance flit toward the crapulent chief, then meet his own steadily. Again and again this happened, a strange sequence which set his alert mind wondering. He studied the man cautiously. What was——?

A flame of hope shot through him from head to foot. He could barely keep from shouting aloud. For the cook's left hand hung at his side, and the forefinger of that hand was playing nervously back and forth —right—left—pause.

A signal? It cost nothing to take a chance, Steve decided. He moved his own left forefinger from right to left.

With a thrill of joy he saw the cook turn his head slightly, twice; a negative motion, but proof that his reply had been noted. Again the man's finger jerked—right—left—pause.

Something in that particular repetition which he must interpret, then? Steve bent all his energies to the task. What was it? What could it be? The sweat stood on his forehead; his throat grew dry and painful. And slowly the long room faded away as the boy's mind tracked back over his past experience; only that moving finger remained in focus, that signal calling impatiently, demanding his recognition.

Of what did it remind him? Something waving right and left. That was it—*flags!* Like a picture on the silver screen it came before him, the sunny, broad drill ground of his rookie days in the Marine Corps. Far away against a background of trees, a red flag with a white center flapping briskly to and fro. The wig-wag! And the language of the wig-wag was—International Morse.

Steve forgot the riotous crowd at the

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table, forgot even his distrust of the slovenly cook, the man appointed to draw a knife across his throat less than a quarter hour hence. He forced the memories that came flooding, with every fiber of his being, till the object of his search stood clearly before him; that page of "Service Regulations," which bore the code. There they were, letters and figures in neat columns!

What was the signal? Right was *one,* left was *two.* Twelve meant *a,* and *a* meant "acknowledge."

He was breathing in gasps, like an exhausted runner, as he attempted to send his answer. Three times to the left—222; then left-right-left again—212. "OK."

The cook nodded. The forefinger began to move once more, slowly, that Steve might make no mistake. Left, right, left, right, and a pause: 2121, that was *j.* 112-*u,* 22-*m,* 1221-*p.* Steadily the message went on: *Jump—for—the—door—when—I—whistle—"Hinky."*

The moving finger stopped.

"OK" signalled Steve again. There was no more.

Feverishly he tried his bonds. Still fast! He knew that if he would follow instructions they must in some way be loosened, yet he was as helpless as ever. As he labored, straining carefully lest his movements should attract attention, he saw the cook leave his place by the wall to circulate ostentatiously about the table, removing soiled dishes here, collecting food there. And as he worked he jested laboriously with the eaters.

"Hurry up there, Shorty. Anybody'd think yuh 'ain't never et nothin' but cow-fodder. I got a job tuh do, and I kain't wait round all night tuh do it, neither. What's that, Three-toe? More punk? Gosh! Well, here she is; an' that's all you'll git tonight."

He sliced the bread with a great carving knife and slammed the loaded plate down upon the oil cloth. For a moment most of the crew were watching him. He held up the knife and ran his thumb lightly along its gleaming edge. "That's the baby'll do the work!" he giggled. Then he turned, and shuffled over to the bunk where Steve sat bound. A youthful outlaw at the far side of the table found his view obstructed and rose to watch.

Crouching, the cook thrust forward the knife till the point touched Steve's throat. "There," he growled, "what d' yuh think o' that, boy? Plenty good fer spies, that is. Jest lean forward, will yuh? Jest once!"

The chief crashed a heavy fist on the table. "Quit it, Scotty," he ordered. "Wait till we're through, I tell yuh."

With a growl of disgust the cook turned toward the table; and as he faced the company his knife hand dropped behind him.

Steve felt the binding ropes give way. How many of the coils had been cut he did not know; every strand that held, even for an instant, was a mortal danger to the plan. Slowly, carefully, he set to work again, testing them out.

His ally, the cook, was moving about the sink now, whistling softly through his teeth. A moment later he broke off, edged over to the table, and slapped the nearest of the company on the shoulder.

"Hey, Stub," he pleaded, "sneak down t' thuh spring an' git a couple o' pails o' water, will yuh? I'm plumb tired out."

There was a roar of laughter as Stub profanely refused, nor did the cook have any better luck on a second attempt.

"Yuh ain't done nothin' all day," they told him. "Git it y'self." And the amorphous chief added his bit. "Bein' the main guy in the ceremony what's comin' don't let yuh out of yo' reg'lar job, none whatever, Scotty."

Grumbling, but obedient, the cook picked up a pail. When he stepped out into the darkness he left the door well ajar behind him.

Steve, holding close to the bunk end, felt the sweat roll down his face, stinging in his eyes, as he realized that the moment was close at hand. Some at the table were watching him idly. He let his head fall

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forward on his chest in the attitude of exhaustion, but not so low but that he could watch the villainous group from the corners of his eyes.

He guessed from what he could see that it was only a matter of minutes, now, before they were through eating. Most of them were armed, he knew. Of those on his own side of the table he had little to fear; he could be through the door before they could possibly get into action—if his bonds would only come loose! As for the others—well, he must take the chance. What if the cook—how in thunder did he know the wig-wag code, anyhow? And what made him think Steve knew it? What if the cook were doublecrossing him? What if he should leap for the door only to meet that keen knife waiting for him in the dark?

Out in the night, softly at first, began a tuneless whistle, barely audible above the tumult of conversation and the clatter of dishes. The hairless leader had leaned back in his chair, full to repletion. With infinite caution Steve worked his feet in under him, squatting on his heels.

The tuneless whistle drew nearer. It ceased for a moment, then broke out again, lour and clear, in the strains of the old song of the overseas service, "Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous."

Steve drew a long breath, leaned boldly forward against his bonds, felt them give! Then he was writhing, twisting on the floor. A single coil held for one split second, tripping him; but he fought loose even as pandemonium broke out in the smoky room. He heard the crash of a falling chair, yells of rage, and the stunning roar of a gun. Again he dived, rolling desperately for the sill, bruising his shoulder on the stone beneath.

A hand reached from the darkness and jerked him to his feet; then he was swung toward the corral gate and hurled against a saddled horse.

"Quick!" yelled a voice in his ear. "Git on that hawse an' drive the cavvy down the trail—gate's open at the lower end. I'll hold these—"

Already Steve was up. As his mount reared a six-gun spoke beside him—again, and again, and again. In the flash of the discharge he saw the white-aproned cook, crouching low, his horse wheeling restlessly on the reins. Steve saw two black figures sprawled grotesquely in the brightly lighted doorway. Then he was pushing the frightened cavvy before him toward the lower end of the corral.

A quick mêlée of squealing ponies, and they were through the gate, thundering down an invisible trail somewhere in the darkness. He followed blindly, reins loose, his heart pounding in his throat. Something white forged up on his left.

"Keep a-goin'!" yelled the cook. "Couldn't hold 'em no longer; they put the lights out. Follow the cavvy close."

Behind them a fusillade of shots rang out, and Steve heard a bullet spit and whine overhead.

"They's a gun hung on yo' horn. Git her loose. Y' may need her when we ketch up with Jake an' the Swede—if the cavvy don't run 'em down."

Steve found his gun. He could see better, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the night. There were stars above him, and a faint glow in the sky over the black ridge to his left suggested that a waning moon was rising. The terrible strain of watching death's approach was giving way, now, to the thrill of battle.

"Pull off that apron, man!" he called to his companion. "They can see it a mile away."

He heard the cook grunt. A moment later the fluttering white thing was gone.

On they thundered, mounts stumbling, catching their feet only to stumble again on the rough trail. Steve was forced to give all his attention to the animal he was riding. And then the cavvy bunched, holding back upon them.

"Shove 'em!" yelped the cook. "We're up with them two. Shoot, kid! Shoot!"

Together their guns roared out and the cavvy, crazed with terror, once more plunged forward. Up from the trail ahead

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came a yell of anger, then the quick *one-two-three* of a .44. Fifty yards more and Steve's mount leaped sideways, almost unseating him. He caught a glimpse of a fallen horse, kicking wildly. Then up at his right, against the brightness of the stars, he saw a moving blot of darkness. He fired twice, and the blot was gone.

No more gun play now, only breakneck riding after the cavvy ahead. And then they were out of the canyon at last, out on the broad sweep of the night plains, and the cavvy was gone, scattered to the four winds. Wearied, they drew rein to ease their panting mounts.

For a while they sat silent, these two who had come through death together. It was the cook who spoke first.

"Got a cigarette, buddy?" he asked. "Honest, I plumb forgot to bring the makin's."

So they lit up, laughing awkwardly as the tension broke. The question that had boiled in Steve's mind for all that last hectic hour came crowding to his lips.

"Man," he pleaded, "I'll say 'thank you' later on; but right now, for gosh sake tell me something. Who are you, and why was that gang so doggone hospitable to a poor li'l stranger like me, and how-come you know the wig-wag, and—?"

The cook chuckled. "Wait on!" he objected. "Give a guy a chance. That was Tray-o'-Spades Charlie's bunch, if you must know; an' being as yuh come from the South I'll tell you they're the worst crowd o' rustlers, an' bank stick-ups, an' stage robbers in the Northwest. When they aimed to cut your throat they were actin' plumb civilized—for them. An' as for me—haven't you ever seen me before? Think."

"I been thinking," Steve confessed. "You sure looked some familiar, but I can't get you located. Give me a lead, can't you?"

"Well," said the cook, "where were you about July 19th, 1918? Personal, I was lyin' outside a shell hole near Vierzy; an' one o' my buddies in the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, an ornery sergeant by the name o' Rand, he pulled me down in that shell hole an' tied up my leg where a piece o' shell had gone through. So tonight when I got the job of cuttin' my old buddy's throat I sort of thought——

"Tommy Knight!" Steve shouted. "You darned ol' leatherneck! So that's where you learned the wig-wag. I'm sure glad I haven't raised a beard since last time you saw me; never would have known you in the world. But how in blazes did you get mixed up with a bunch like that?"

Again the cook chuckled. "I'm the detective from the Cattle Association they were watchin' for," he confessed. "Been with 'em two months. Kind of hated to see my own throat cut by proxy, too. There's a posse o' deputies waitin' orders at Bland—you must have come through there this mornin'—an' another posse across the pass at Fontain's. They were goin' to close in when I gave the word. You kind of hurried things, but those guys can't get out o' the hills afore daylight, not on foot. We got 'em like rats in a trap.

"Let's get ridin', kid. There's a ranch couple o' miles ahead, where I can telephone from. You'd better hole-up there an' rest a little, then——

Steve Rand grunted. "Tommy Knight," he growled, "those crooks got my hawse, and he's the best hawse I ever owned, and they darn' near spoiled my vacation trip, too. Beginning right now I'm a deputy sheriff. Doggone it, Tom, did you honest think I'd miss a fight?"

For answer the ex-cook dug his knuckles hard into Steve Rand's aching ribs. "You darned old leatherneck, yourself!" he shouted. "Pick up that cayuse an' let's be goin'. The Marines have landed—with both feet!"

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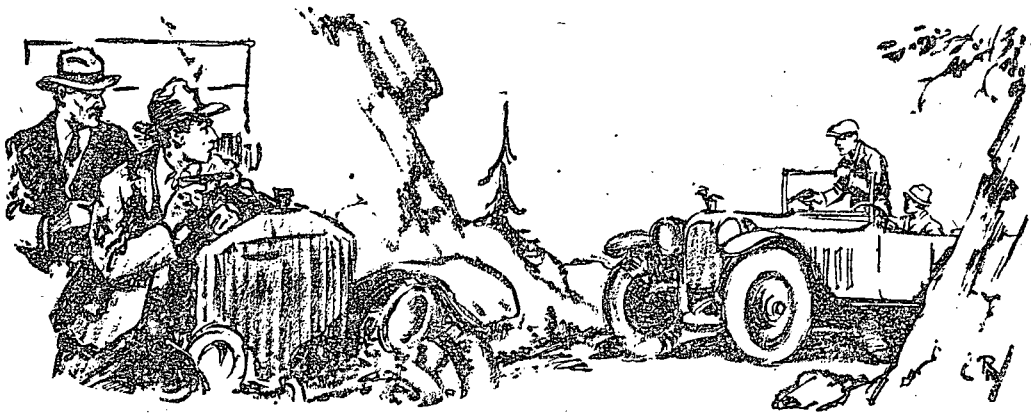

THE BEST MAN

By E. CHARLES VIVIAN

Author of "Getting Your Man," "Freedom of the Gang," etc.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS CONCEAL THE SPEED LINES OF A CAR; THE DOPE TRAIL THAT LEADS ACROSS THE BORDER; THE IRON THAT LIES UNDER A TRAMP'S RAGGED OUTFIT, OR THE SECRET OF A WOMAN'S LIFE

THE little town of Four Bits drowsed in hot sunlight when Joe Hardy tramped in from the south, hobo-fashion, his worldly goods tied in a dingy handkerchief which reposed on his back, held there by the end of a stick thrust over his shoulder and through the knot in the handkerchief. He passed up the one street of the town, slouching along in the dust; an old rancher on the veranda of Hedges' Hotel, dozing in the shade, hardly opened his eyes to see Joe pass in. Loafers were plentiful enough, and this one looked too frayed and rusty to be interesting.

Joe slouched along the entry, found an open door, and entered what had once been the bar of Hedges' outfit, before the law decreed that all drinks should be soft. The bar itself remained to testify to past glories, and Dan Hedges, behind it, tried to keep awake and read the *Border Herald;* over by the partition wall four cowboys whiled away the hours at poker until Kate Rainer's dance saloon across the way should open at sunset. By the window sat a keen-faced, military looking man—though not in any kind of uniform—amusing himself at solitaire.

Joe slouched up to the bar, deposited his bundle on the floor, and leaned on the polished metal till Hedges looked up. Then he nodded, and winked, and smacked his lips.

"Whaddye want?" Hedges asked sharply.

Joe removed his hand from his pocket and held it up. A twenty-dollar gold piece stuck mysteriously to his thumb, and he smacked his lips again.

Hedges shook his head. "Not on your life!" he said, with a momentary glance at the solitaire player by the window. "Where'd you plant the corpse after the robbery?"

Joe planked the coin down on the counter. "Lemonade," he said, disregarding the query. "Weather's enough to knock a buzzard cuckoo."

Hedges produced the drink. "You do look a bit queer," he remarked, as he turned to the cash register for change.

"Hey!" said Joe angrily. "Reckon you gotta insult an honest man when you see one?"

HEDGES turned and put down the little heap of change. "No," he replied unmovedly, and resumed his seat and paper.

Joe gave him a look which implied that he could have said much, but he refrained from further argument, took up his glass,

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and turned his back on Hedges to drink. The lone figure by the window caught his eye, and, taking the remainder of his drink, he went across.

"Call that solitaire, Mister?" he inquired derisively. "Queen's out—you ain't watchin' your hand. Jack of spades comin' along too—you'll get out this hand, if you're careful."

"Get out of this, you hobo!" said the other man wrathfully. "Who's playing solitaire—me or you?"

Joe sighed and turned away mournfully. "A cold world," he soliloquized audibly. "Cold enough for snow."

Nobody took any notice. The solitaire player went on, presently packed his cards, shuffled, and began again. Joe subsided into a chair by the window, his roving gaze arrested by a parody of a car parked close against the wall for shade. It had been painted when cars were first made, apparently, and the only good thing about it was the set of tires, if looks went for anything.

The town of Four Bits drowsed on while Joe sat by the window, caressing his unshaven chin. Presently the solitaire player tired of his amusement, and stared out of the window absently.

Joe Hardy rubbed his chin hard, and then scratched his forehead. The other man nodded sleepily as he sat. Joe played a little tattoo on the table, the other man yawned.

The four cowboys went on with their game, interested in nothing else, but Hedges, as he pretended to read his paper behind the bar, kept ears and eyes open, for he had been in the service himself before he turned to hotel keeping. Queen out and jack of spades coming along—that meant a woman and a man due here soon, or else these two would not be waiting like this. They were coming from south to north, by the way the apparent hobo had moved his hand from chin to forehead. Hedges could not read Morse by ear, so Joe's tattoo on the table told him nothing; nor had he ascertained why they were wanted by that solitaire-playing Federal man and his confederate, though Joe had stated the reason plainly enough. Interested, but entirely neutral, since he had nothing at stake, Hedges waited behind his bar. The cowboys finished their game, had another drink apiece, and lounged out to the veranda; Joe called for another lemonade as excuse for staying; and the Federal man had a soft drink. Four Bits drowsed on while the torrid day grew older.

OUT of a cloud of dust on the road leading in from southward emerged a low touring car, and Joe, scrutinizing it as it slowed along the street, decided that one had only to strip off the mud guards to show racing lines. The woman at the wheel braked to a crawl while she and her companion scanned the frontages on either side as they came. Outside Hedges' the car stopped, and the two got out.

Joe Hardy, out of the barroom before the car door had slammed, turned away from the front entrance and vanished somewhere behind the hotel. The Federal man stood up, yawned very widely, and still had his chin dropped when the woman from the car preceded her companion into the room. So it happened that the two men stood, each with open mouth, staring at each other, and the woman looked puzzled.

"Just walked into it, Eddy Joslin," said the Federal man.

"But you've got nothing on me this time, Schuyler," said the newcomer triumphantly. "The straight and narrow for mine now, all the time. Me and this lady's looking for a minister to get hitched up——"

"Can it," Schuyler advised contemptuously. "I'm too old a bird, Joslin. Come across with it."

Hedges put his paper down and leaned on the bar, listening intently. The woman shrugged in an indifferent way, and turned toward him.

"I suppose we can get a meal here?" she inquired. "My—we have driven all the way from the border."

"You sure can, ma'am," said Hedges. "Fried chicken suit?"

She smiled sweetly, and her dark eyes made a slave of the bachelor Dan Hedges at once. "There's nothing better," she agreed. "And then—you can tell us where to find somebody who can marry us?"

Hedges shook his head. "Sorry, ma'am—our only stand-by in that line is out at

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Higgins' ranch, pintin' one of the boys straight while he hands in his checks. I reckon you'll have to go on to Latt's Creek for that—I'll rustle up that chicken."

"You hear that, Eddy." She turned to her companion, who nodded assent, but kept his gaze on the man he had called Schuyler while Hedges lifted up a section of the bar and went out.

"I got it, Lal," he answered. "But we've got to get past this guy, first. He and I—well, we've met before."

SCHUYLER pointed to a black, leather-covered case which Joslin carried. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

"Typewriter," Joslin answered. "I'm sellin' 'em."

Schuyler laughed scornfully. "The devil turned peddler!" he retorted sarcastically. "Come clean, Joslin—I've got you."

Angrily, Joslin planked the case down on a near-by table and clicked it open. "Try it—tap it—play with it!" he advised. "All in full sight—nowhere in it to hide a tenth of an ounce of anything. Overhaul every scrap of baggage in the automobile, and then say! Cut open any tire you like, Schuyler—rip up the padding. And then say!"

"I'm taking no chances, Eddy," Schuyler retorted. "I don't know the lady—she may be the goods—but I know you!"

It was his last word for the time, for Joslin, who had apparently been engaged in closing down the typewriter, suddenly shot a fist out and upward. The blow crashed on the point of Schuyler's chin, and, lifted clean off his feet, he went backward with a thud that brought Dan Hedges hurrying—but too late to stop the pair on their way to the front entrance. The woman, manipulating the starter, shook her head.

"Bad, Eddy—bad," she said. "He'll wake up and put out a through call all the ways. Which road?"

Joslin pointed ahead. "Over the divide to Latt's Creek—they'll know we daren't show up there, so we'll go," he answered. "There's not a thing in this one-horse town can come near this machine for speed, and the north-bound Limited stops at Latts Creek for water. I'll have you aboard and on your way to Denver before sunset, and then drive across the state line—"

"Schuyler's a Federal—and wise to us," she reminded him.

"But he's got to get state men to act, till he catches up," Joslin pointed out. "Step on the gas, Lal—but who the devil put Schuyler wise?"

"Search me," she answered.

The low, musical note of the long car's engine gradually went up the scale; she clicked the gear shift from third to high, though they were ascending the divide, and already on a grade at which many an engine would stall in second. Joslin looked back at Four Bits, now a shabby little huddle of huts in the scorched plain beneath them.

"By the Lord!" he said, with infinite contempt. "That mouldy flivver outside Hedges' place is turned out after us."

The woman, her eyes on the twisting road, laughed. It sounded like putting a mule to run down a racer. Joslin settled himself beside her, and laughed too.

"Damn Schuyler!" he said suddenly. "I'm too hungry to think, and fried chicken——"

"But who put Schuyler wise?" She echoed his query of a minute before. The banked, built road over the divide unrolled before them.

"I dunno—I sort of felt Four Bits was none too safe. But once you're on the Limited——"

The long car leaped at the grade, up and up toward the crest. Joslin, absorbed in watching the road ahead, did not even trouble to look back, but he smiled to himself at the futility of turning out in a tin flivver to chase such perfect mechanism as Lal was driving. Schuyler might have known better——

II

HEDGES was bending over Schuyler when Joe Hardy entered the barroom again. Schuyler, for his part, was sitting up

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in a dazed way—the knockout had been thorough, and his senses came back slowly. Hedges turned to the apparent hobo.

"What is the game, anyhow?" he asked.

Joe shook his head, as if to say that he had no time for explanations. He lifted Schuyler to his feet. "I trusted you to hold them while I went through the car," he said.

"What—what was in it?" Schuyler asked.

"Nix," said Joe. "Joslin's carrying the goods on him. Who was the woman, Schuyler?"

Schuyler shook his head. "I dunno. He called her Lal—"

He stopped there at Hardy's change of expression. Suddenly Joe laughed, an ugly laugh.

"And they were eloping—looking for somebody to hitch 'em up?" he asked, as if the answer were foregone.

Schuyler nodded.

"Joslin pulled that trick on me—and got away with it—before I was wise to who he was," Hardy explained. "Lal's his sister. They run that game and get all the sympathy there is, in places like Four Bits. Nobody connects up an eloping couple with two crooks."

"Gosh!" said Hedges.

Joe wheeled on him so suddenly that he recoiled. "You—get on the wire," he ordered. "You know the game, Hedges—get police headquarters in every town in the state, and say Joslin's running a cargo of snow with his sister. Describe the car—they'll know the man. Come on, Schuyler. They've headed for the divide—we'll chase 'em in your buzz wagon. May do it, by the old mule trail."

Schuyler, following him out, shook his head doubtfully. Joe got aboard the ancient flivver by the wall and pressed the starter. Schuyler had barely seated himself before they were off, with a rattle as of tin cans shot on a dumpheap.

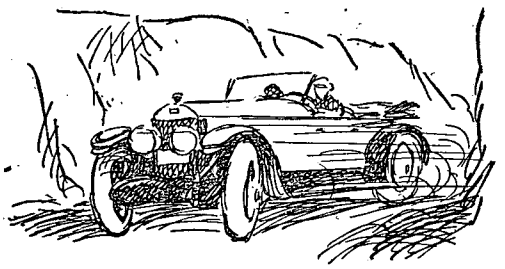
"How did you miss 'em?" Schuyler asked.

"I'd gone through everything in the car, and was coming round by the back," Joe answered. "I reckoned on finding you with an automatic out, and Joslin backed against the wall for me to frisk him. You made a bad break, Schuyler."

"I sure did," Schuyler agreed.

"What's rattling?" Joe asked, for the car clanked as if it would fall to pieces any minute.

"Two bits of tin-plate, tied under the chassis, to make her sound old," Schuyler explained. "Now let her rip."



They were clear of the town, and as Joe accelerated the white end of the splendidly engineered road seemed to leap toward them. High up, now, halfway to the crest of the hills, the long car that Lal Joslin drove rounded a hairpin bend in the road. Joe Hardy, feeling the power he had at command, nodded contentedly.

"We'll take the mule trail to the top, Schuyler," he said, "and head 'em off."

"Or bust, maybe," Schuyler commented.

JOSLIN and his sister, happy in the knowledge that they had left nothing behind but the old flivver, felt so safe that they did not trouble to look back until Joe and Schuyler were hidden in the folds of the hills. Had they known what sort of engine and transmission the rickety-looking chassis covered, they would have been less happy. A master-driver, Joe took every grade and bend on high, whizzing toward the summit in a way that made Schuyler hold his breath and grip hard on the tinny side of the car. The road twined and curled among the hills, a magnificent motorway blasted out of the rock to replace the old mule trail that had served an earlier generation, and for two-thirds of the way up Joe shot their rattling box of tricks along it, on a surface so smooth that the tricking tin-plates barely clattered under them. Schuyler, looking upward, saw that they overhauled the long car yard by yard; it might be a racer, but this in Joe's hands was a lightning streak.

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Five miles up, with Four Bits lying beneath them like a patterned handkerchief, the cliff on their left fell away to a slope, across which meandered the old trail, in grades impossible to any ordinary car. Joe fired the flivver at the slope as if it had been a projectile, and they literally leaped off the made road to the rutted danger by which they could shorten their way by a good four miles. They would rejoin the road beyond the crest of the divide—if the car held together under the terrific strain imposed on it. They took grades of one in three, sheered perilously away from tree stumps that threatened sudden death, and more than once hung on to slopes where a mere momentary hesitation over the wheel would have sent the car rolling down the hillside.

But Joe's hand and eye never faltered. Schuyler, feeling himself ten years older for the deaths he had seen staring at him, took breath when they topped the ridge, and held it again as they plunged like an express elevator on the pioneer trail that jarred every nerve with its sun-hardened ruts. Far down beneath them a cluster of shanties about a streak of silver betrayed the existence of Latts Creek. In the middle distance a section of the motor road they had left for this perilous track showed like white thread, and they plunged toward it, rattling like a foundry as ruts and little gullies jolted wheels clear of the ground.

"Easy, Joe—for the Lord's sake, man—" Schuyler gasped.

BUT Joe Hardy, his ancient hat crammed down hard on his tousled hair, his mouth set grimly, and rendered grimmer still by the three-days' stubble that clothed his unwashed chin, abated no atom of his pace, for his heart was in this quest of Eddy Joslin. He bumped and slithered them downward while Schuyler gritted his teeth and gripped in stark fear, for never had man lived through such a drive as this.

They came, after many long ages of suspense, with a bump on to the motor road. Joe Hardy skidded the flivver crosswise of the road and leaped out to cover behind the chassis, while the long car, sliding round a bend just above them, shuddered to her brakes as Lal saw how the road was blocked ahead. Joslin, clutching at the windscreen, stood up, an automatic pistol in his hand. But he held it loosely, unaimed, for as yet he did not connect up this thing straddling the road with the ancient rattletrap standing in the shade at Four Bits. Then Joe Hardy stood up, and the black ring of the muzzle of his revolver gaped at Joslin.

"Drop it, Eddy!" he ordered, across the ten-yard interval that separated them when the long car came to rest. "I'd as soon drill you as not—drop it and get out."

The girl leaned on her steering wheel, blank fear in her eyes. "Joe, you Joe!" she gasped.

"Sure thing, Lal," Joe said cheerfully. "Hearing down at Four Bits there was a wedding afoot, I reckoned I'd come along as best man. Schuyler, rustle along and put a pair of bracelets on that man. I'll take the chance before we search for the stuff."

"Search, you muttonhead!" Joslin jeered. "I told your man down at Four Bits I'd cut it out. You'll get nothing on us this trip, Joe."

Heedless of the gibe, Joe kept his man covered while Schuyler handcuffed Joslin, and the girl sat like one stupified at her wheel.

Schuyler reached for the black leather case and held it up. "Typewriter—said he'd turned over a new leaf and was sellin' 'em," he explained to Joe, who laughed scornfully.

"Open it," he bade.

Schuyler clicked the latch and exposed a perfectly innocent portable typewriter. For a moment Joe Hardy looked puzzled, and then he glanced at the girl.

"She's innocent—I'll swear Lal's innocent!" Joslin exclaimed.

So suddenly that Joslin leaped in the air at the crash, Joe fired one shot from his revolver through the black leather case that Schuyler had taken off the little machine. The echoes of the report went bellowing

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among the hills, and a white powder trickled out from the edges of the hole. Joe Hardy picked up the case; instead of the ordinary three-ply wood of which such things were made, this was formed of two sheets of metal, with half an inch between them. Into the cavity between the metal sheets had been packed the white powder.

"About four pounds of it, I'd say," Joe calculated aloud. "We can leave frisking him for the rest till we get him down to Latts Creek, Schuyler." He went up beside the long car and, with one foot on the running board, faced the dazed-looking girl.

"Lal, he said you were innocent," he told her. "Did you know?"

She nodded, mutely.

"Are you carrying any—look at me, Lal!—are you carrying any?"

Still without speaking she shook her head.

"But you knew!" Joe said. "Lal, of all the traffics, this is the vilest on earth. I've tracked him up from the border—a hobo can hear things that nobody would say if an ordinary man were about—and I learned just where a woman with a car would pick him up—carrying wreckage for a score of lives. Making dollars out of death—the very lowest, dirtiest game a thing in the shape of a man would play, and you helping!"

Stung to reply, she looked him squarely in the eyes. "Don't preach, Joe—leave that to the judge when he passes sentence on us."

Joe turned to Schuyler. 'Take him down," he ordered. "Put him aboard your flivver and make Latts Creek in time for the Limited. Take that case with him—you know where to leave the car in case I'm too late to catch the train. I'll be on hand to back your evidence."

"You—you're following with her?" Schuyler half asked.

"Beat it!" said Joe. And Schuyler took his man, straightened the apparent flivver to the road, and set off down the grade.

JOE HARDY stood beside the girl with one foot on the running board, waiting till Schuyler started. "Now, Lal," he said.

She held out both her hands toward him. "Won't you put bracelets on me, Joe?" she asked.

He smiled. "Not yet. Why do you go in on this dirty game?"

She shrugged. "Excitement, and—he's my brother."

"There's not much excitement inside a penitentiary—where he's going," Joe remarked.

"Oh, get on with it!" she exclaimed with sudden fierceness. "Why do you bait me—do you enjoy it?"

"Least of anything I know, Lal," he answered somberly.

"How did you get here—how did he—Schuyler—get here?" she asked abruptly.

Joe pointed up at the end of the mule trail. "That way," he answered.

She stared from the track to him with patent unbelief. "No car could do it—no man could drive that track," she said. "Especially—we left him in Four Bits, and came fast."

"We came faster," he told her.

"They say—from Denver down to the border—that the devil himself couldn't get away from Joe Hardy," she reflected.

"You tried," he reminded her.

"I didn't know you were on our trail," she said. "But—you're taking me in—why did you let Schuyler go on alone?" Sudden fear of him showed in her eyes. "Why do you—what do you want of me?"

"Once," he said, "I wanted everything on earth, Lal."

"What do you want?" she insisted.

He stared at her fixedly. "Lal, suppose Eddy had got through to Holmes with this cargo of dope; what would have been your share?"

"Holmes?" she echoed derisively. "Holmes is a back number. Deventer pays—oh, you devil!"

FOR Joe Hardy laughed softly, triumphantly. "The one thing I wanted, Lal," he said, "and you came across with it so easily! Deventer—of course! And not one of us ever thought of him or his chance to build up avenues for drug traffic. Lal, you've given us all we want."

"And I?" she asked, with sudden fear. "Deventer will know Eddy would never have given him away—it will be known

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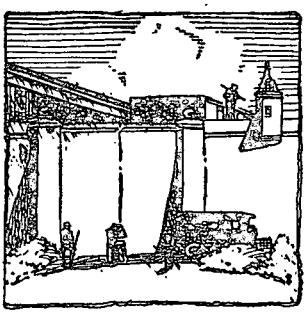
that your man Schuyler took Eddy and left me alone with you. Joe, surely as you use what I said, make one move against Deventer, you sign my death warrant. I know him."

"But do you know Joe Hardy?" he asked.

"No man nor woman will ever know all that's in your brain, Joe," she said, "but you know how long Deventer's arm is. It can reach to me even in the penitentiary where you're putting me—"



"I didn't say I was," he interrupted.

"As if it mattered now!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"Lal," he said earnestly, "I'm giving you freedom in return for Deventer's name. You're no more than a pawn in this game, and I can afford that. And I tell you, the first Deventer will know of our being on his trail will be when the handcuffs go on him. You're free—drive me down to Latts Creek."

"I'm free?" she echoed incredulously.

"I said it—Joe Hardy," he answered. He leaned heavily on the side of the car, and suddenly vaulted clean over her, landing seated beside her, a trick that only a trained acrobat could have accomplished. "I'll make the Limited with Schuyler, and give you your freedom in return for Deventer's name."

She set the engine running and released the brakes. "Joe—you wonderful Joe—you drive a car where no man could drive—you made me afraid! And, unless Deventer learns—"

"He won't learn, till he's beyond harming you. Lal, give up this game—I'm giving you your chance."

"I've no object in keeping it on, now Eddy—and you've caught him. You caught him, Joe—I've got to hate you for that."

"You're quite sure?" he asked. Beneath the surface carelessness of the question lurked anxiety that she divined. She pressed the accelerator, and the long car gave a breath-taking leap forward and down.

"I—I ought," she said uncertainly.

Then they sat silent while the long vista of plain below them shrank, and the horizon contracted until she drew up outside the depot at Latt's Creek. To the southeast a line of smoke in the sky told of the Limited's coming, and on the far side of the rails stood Schuyler and his prisoner. Joe Hardy got out from the car.

"We shall meet again, Lal," he said.

She looked down at him wistfully, and behind the stubble of beard and dirt with which he had disguised himself for this task she saw the real man. "Do you wish it?" she asked.

"Do you?" he asked in reply.

She released the clutch, and the long car slid away. Joe Hardy crossed the rails to where Schuyler stood, and then looked back. She had halted the car, and turned to wave her hand before swinging on to the road.

Eddy Joslin lifted his manacled hands to wave back to her, and Joe Hardy smiled. He knew she was not waving good-by to Eddy.

A REAL MINING TIP

EDDIE GIBSON, bellboy of the Biltmore hotel of Los Angeles, California, was recently the recipient of an unusual mining tip from a Nevada mining man—a tip incidentally that Eddie found about as hard to cash in on as the ordinary variety of mine "tip."

A. V. Seymour, Weepah, Nevada mining man, arrived in Los Angeles with a suitcase full of highgrade gold ore, stopped at the Biltmore: and tipped Eddie a four pound chunk of the ore.

"Where do I cash it?" Eddie inquired.

A mining man informed him that he could get the gold out by sending it to a smelter. The nearest one is at Douglas, Arizona.

F. H.

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THE TWINS OF TROUBLE

By RUSSELL ARDEN BANKSON

Author of "Gold Madness," "Green Gold," etc.

OLD JESS SWITZER WAS A SURVIVAL OF THE DAYS WHEN MEN FOLLOWED THE GOLD TRAILS, FIGHTING FOR WHAT THEY WANTED AND DYING FOR WHAT THEY FAILED TO GET. HOWEVER, HE AND HIS FAITHFUL BURRO, PETE, HAD A FEW TRICKS TO SPRING ON THE MODERN WORLD WHEN IT CAME TO ENCOUNTERS WITH DESERT BAD MEN

THERE is always something else a little further on. Or at least that is the way Jess Switzer, hill-rat, sized up life. The gold was there, and some time he would stumble onto the pot at the end of the rainbow. And so he raised his voice in vociferous acknowledgment that God was in his heaven and all was well on this green old earth.

Pete, whose sturdy underprops had borne his hill-rat master across every mountain divide of the western ranges from Central America to the Selkirks, cocked his right ear forward and his left ear back.

His right told him that all was not well ahead; his left that all was not well aboard the hurricane deck. For Pete, understanding friend of mankind and prospector's burden bearer, knew that Jess was off key on every note and that two bad men from the city were dragging their aching feet along the trail that leads in back of beyond.

"Hee-haw!" Pete brayed in pained objection to the off-note discord of Jess' song, and "Hee-e-e-e-e-e-e, Haw-w-w-w-w-w-w!" in warning of that danger which lurked ahead.

Jess brought his song to an abrupt end.

"Yuh durned old moth eaten bone sack," he lamented in soulful sorrow. "What yuh got t' go an' butt in on me fer when I sing?"

Pete stopped with irrevocable determination, his legs spread wide apart, his ears like fixed bayonets. Jess' head bobbed forward and snapped back with a popping sound in the region of his Adam's apple. He blinked.

Jess began to count, slowly, with grim determination. He always counted to ten before he struck Pete, when he was angry. So he had never yet struck a blow.

"One, two, three—four—fi——"

His voice died out to nothingness. His eyes bulged wide open.

"Hands up!" came the snappy order, and the hill-rat looked straight down into the bottomless maw of a heavy gun leveled at his own beloved cranium.

"Wall, I'll be a rattlesnake's brother!" he ejaculated.

"Get 'em up, quick!"

Jess turned argumentative.

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"Neighbor, me an' Pete's mindin' our own business, an' we'd be jest as much obliged if yuh'd do the same," he said.

The man behind the gun swore and his finger twitched on the trigger.

"An' I'd thank yuh kindly if yuh'd git off'n the trail," he went on blandly, as though he were discussing a proposition with a porcupine. "Shake a hoof, Pete!"

Pete shook.

His ears laid back along his neck, his tail switching, he lunged.

Two men, one standing close behind the other, leaped, but not in time. Like jacks-in-a-box, they bounced from the trail and went rolling in undignified disorder down the steep slope of the mountainside, crashing through brush and over fallen logs.

Jess watched them, filled with mild curiosity as to where they would terminate their excursion. Then he pulled his grease-caked felt hat back to a firmer anchorage on his head and clucked to his long eared charger.

"Yuh got the tecknickey an' yuh got the speed," he complimented. "If yuh jest had some brains, yuh'd be as good as me. Now anybody could see them critters wasn't aimin' t' be no friends, but it took me t' figger out they was aimin' t' drill a hole clean through us."

Pete cocked his left ear back at Jess and his right down the steep mountain slope where groans and curses polluted the rarified ozone. There was a decided smirk on his donkey countenance as he quirked his tail.

Jess hesitated. Then he eased himself slowly from the saddle and moved down the incline toward the victims of Pete's unfriendliness.

"Reckon," he grumbled to himself, "I couldn't leave even them sort o' buzzards lyin' loose here in the hills."

NIGHT—the hem of God's diamond studded royal robe pinioned on the jagged crags of the mountains; the swishing gurgle of an icy stream; the silence of the pulsating forest; peace—and Jess Switzer, hill-rat, who loved life as he found it, filled with fancy carefree abandonment, was in it now a sobered and subdued living and breathing part of it.

Stooped shoulders bent to rest a bearded chin on squatting knees, he stared into the dying embers of his camp fire. His ears attuned to the subtle lyre of insect wings, the squeak of a frightened kangaroo mouse, the snort of a moose crossing the stream a mile below, the snapping of a twig, the myriad sounds of the silent wilderness, yet unconscious of them all, he pondered.

He pondered, because stretched out on the ground, just at the edge of the blacker shadows lay the two men he had dragged up onto the trail and escorted to the camp in the canyon. They were a sullen, snarling pair, who cursed at him and vowed his death. For reasons of self-preservation Jess had felt the necessity of binding them, hands and feet, while he figured a way of letting go of them without damage to himself.

That they were bad men from the city he had no doubt from the heavy rolls of currency which they carried. But of the past he was not concerned. Even the future would take care of itself. But the present worried him. He had taken their guns and knives away from them when they were in a helpless condition from their falls, and he had bound them securely. Their rolls of money he had disdained. It was paper, and he was weary of it; besides his was a gold complex and nothing but the yellow dust held any lure for him.

"Reckon," he told himself in a whisper, as he stared straight into the dying embers of the fire, "them boys has been up t' some sort o' divilm'nt, an' it ain't nothin' me'n Pete'ud want t' git mixed in."

Some time after the moon had slipped down behind the ridge, he made his decision. He must unshackle this burden of crime and worry and danger from his own shoulders. And there was a way. He could sneak away from them and leave them there in the wilderness.

For a long time he listened to their breathing, until he was certain that they slept. Then he crept stealthily over the ground until he was close beside them. Cautiously extracting a heavy sharp hunting knife from a pocket, he opened a blade and stuck the point in the earth where it

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could be easily found and reached when daylight came.

Then from his duffle he carefully sorted out a generous supply of provisions, enough to last the two for several days, and laid this in a neat pile beside the fire, with a small tin can of matches on top of it.

Pete was grazing in a stand of bunch grass down the canyon a short distance, and Jess gathered all his own accouterments together and lugged them down there.

"Whoa, durn yuh!" he called in a soft undertone, when he came up to Pete.

The burro greeted him with a friendly bray.

"Shut up, yuh son o' democracy!" he stormed back. "What yuh want t' go an' do, yuh heathen mountain canary? Yuh ain't got no more brains'n a jackass, blowin' off steam like that. We got t' bust up this here friendly gatherin' afore it busts us, but yuh act like yuh was askin' 'em t' come on."

Pete was chastised, and he subsided into silence, grunting and groaning with discomfort while Jess loaded his pack.

Jess Switzer was of a school of hillrats who had come into the old gold country of Idaho since the balmy days of six-gun and sluice box cleanups, but he was filled with the lore of that half forgotten period a generation or two before, when men followed the gold trails, fighting for what they wanted and dying for what they failed to get.

Life was something good to him, as long as he could fill his lungs with the sweet balsam of the forests and the crisp breezes from the glacial peaks, and the gold fever coursed along his arteries.

He was going nowhere in particular, as long as the rainbow's end was off in that general direction. His creed was: Dig a little, pan a little, eat a little, sleep a little—and eventually make the big cleanup.

A FEW weeks previous he had thought his hands were on the pot o' gold, when he staked a claim in the old ghost city of Normand and started a mad rush in there. But a Chinaman had burst that bubble, and Pete and he had moved out of there ahead of the mob. Since then they had ambled over into another range of mountains.

But a complication had come into the even tenor of his life, and a burning ambition to wipe it from his slate urged him forward into the dead of night. He finished packing his load, then crawled up onto Pete's back and turned the little beast's head out into the trail.

All that night he traveled, alternating his riding by walking for stretches, and with each step away from his captives, Old Man Trouble loosened his grip on Jess' throat, and Peace perched on his shoulder.

Came the first golden fingers of the morning sun slanting down across the ranges and Jess, heaving a sigh of relief, began to look out for a likely spot in which to rest his bones. Pete sighed audibly and grabbed at tufts of grass along the trail. During the night they had followed the canyon for some distance, then climbed up over a low divide, followed another canyon, and climbed over another divide into a third canyon, through a forest labyrinth that would defy deciphering.

Jess chanced to be walking behind at this particular time, and without warning Pete came to an abrupt halt, ears at attention, legs wide apart. Jess, getting ready to lift his voice in soulful harmony, collided with the destructive end of his beast of burden, biting his tongue and rattling his teeth.

"Yuh got the orneriest disposition o' any human bein' I ever hooked up with," he threatened, reaching for a club of proper size for chastisement purposes. Then he began to count.

"One, two, three—,"

He got no further.

"Well, well!" a voice greeted with icy scorn. "If it isn't our own Little Red Riding Hood, come back to her bad wolves!"

Jess straightened up and stared.

Seated calmly beside the fire over which

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they were boiling a pot of coffee, were his own two captives. If possible, they gave the appearance of greater fierceness and brutality than they had on the previous day.

Jess' lips moved, but for a minute no words would come to his tongue, while he straightened out the dilemma in his mind.

"A wood-louse is a eddicated high-brow, along side o' yuh," he addressed Pete after a time, almost sorrowfully as a parent would speak to an erring child. "Which goes t' show yuh ain't got no brains. Yuh done took us all night in a circle an' brung us back t' trouble's two twins!"

THE bad men fro the city were without their guns, but they stood up and started toward Jess, checking their threatening advance only when they noted his right hand resting carelessly on the butt of his gun.

"Allow yuh hadn't orter git too neighborly," Jess spoke to them in his low, even voice. "Yuh got grub an' yuh got matches, an' me an' Pete ain't lookin' fer no company. They's all outdoors, an' they's a durned sight o' it, so's yuh an' us don't have t' be mixed up. I'd thank yuh kindly t' stay right whar yuh are, while we git sommers besides here."

Pete crouched slightly, one ear forward and the other back, but in the tensity of the moment no one noticed.

"Shake a hoof, Pete!" Jess ordered.

Both ears laid close to his neck, Pete shook again.

A bad man bellowed in sudden fear and leaped to one side; his partner in crime seized the bubbling coffee pot from the flames and swung it wide by the handle, landing it square on Pete's head.

Bedlam was loosened, but Pete's duty was performed, and with head held high he moved on along the trail, while Jess stood in the middle of the camp with gun leveled at the coffee throwing fugitive's head, counting slowly.

"—nine, ten!" he finished triumphantly. Then he poked the gun back in its holster.

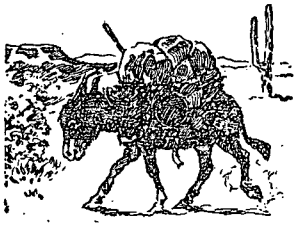
"I orter done it," he argued with himself, aloud. "He hit Pete, an' they ain't no finer mountain canary this side o' Arizona."

The bad men were fuming and raging, ready to commit murder, but they were at a disadvantage, and they cowered back, waiting a chance. Jess ignored them. Pete was moving along the trail down the canyon, and he followed, looking back over his shoulder once in a while, to note that the two outlaws were where he had left them.

WHEN a mile separated him from the camp, Jess ordered Pete to stop. The scalding coffee had done no particular harm to Pete's thick armor, and for this Jess was glad. He rubbed the burro behind the ears and then climbed up in the branches of a tall tree to reconnoiter the country and gather his bearings.

He seemed to be quite a way from where he was going, which was the furtherest distance possible before another night, from the camp of the bandits. So he climbed down again and started Pete along the trail.

The slow miles unwound as the sun shifted. Jess had not slept the night before



but no thought of rest came to him until the shadows of another twilight stole along the canyon. Then he began to look about for a camp site, which he found at a point where the trail crossed a little open swale beside the creek.

"Rest yer lily white hoofs in that," he invited Pete, as he loosened the load from the beast's back. "Yuh an' me is goin' t' make this here place our permanent eatin' an' sleepin' place fer t'night."

Jess Switzer had shaken trouble, and contentment coursed through him, filling his heart and welling up to his lips. Frying salt pork over a tiny fire and listening to the bubbling song of the coffee pot, he raised his voice in harmless discord.

"Lived a miner, forty-niner, an' his dat-t-e-r, Clem-en-t-i-i-i-i-i-n-n-n-n-e!" he warbled to the first unblinking star of the night.

"Hee-haw! hee-aw!" came the answering echo from the fringe of the forest.

Jess stopped.

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"Thar yuh go!" he bemoaned. "Allus, *allus,* buttin' in when I sing."

Jess ate in silence and fell asleep beside the fire, to dream of outlaws from the city who surrounded him, dogging his steps everywhere he went, jeering at him, cramping his style.

He was up at daybreak and ate a hearty breakfast. Then he went down to the creek to fill his canteen. The creek was a new one to him, and it interested him. The gold fever was coursing through his veins, and he went back to camp for his shovel, pick and gold pan.

"Likely lookin' crick," he mumbled. "Ain't seen nuthin' like it lately."

He got busy and time passed. Bedrock was shallow, and soon he was panning. The first pan showed color, and excitement seized him. He worked in a frenzy of haste, shoveling, washing—washing and shoveling. And each time he took a trace of gold dust from the pan. It wasn't much, but it was gold, and his hands trembled while his heart pounded.

Midday came and the afternoon slipped away.

Pete brayed loud and long, expressing the agonized fear that he had been deserted. Jess stood up and called to him.

THEN his jaws dropped open in helpless amazement. Along the dim trail which he had followed through the previous day, two human beings, weary and dejected, were stumbling, dragging feet that all but refused to motivate, their arms hanging loose at their sides, their clothing torn to tatters, their heads down so that chins rested on chests.

They were at the point of exhaustion—and there was no doubting their identity. Jess' troubles were upon him again. Pete again trilled his canary song to the high heavens, ending with a crashing boom of rage. The bandits stopped and looked about them. They were only a few feet from Jess, but at first their dulled vision did not recognize him.

"Water!" the one in the lead gasped, with thick tongue and parched lips.

"Yuh durned fools, yuh got it right beside yuh, all the way down the trail," Jess grumbled at them.

"Don't stand there like a fool!" the other snarled. "Get us something to eat."

They stretched out on the ground beside the creek and buried their faces in the icy water. Jess watched them, pondering. Squinting at them he shoved his battered hat to the back of his head and scratched his temple with his right hand.

"What yuh taggin' along arter me an' Pete fer?" he demanded, when they sat up and looked at him.

"Damn these mountains and everything in them!" one of the two swore earnestly.

"Where's that grub?" the other put in. "Thought we'd never catch up with you. What did you go so damned fast for?"

"Whar's yer own grub I give yuh?" Jess argued.

"Big bear came into camp and cleaned us out," the first speaker explained with a snarl. "We didn't lose any bear. We headed out and we've been coming ever since."

Jess groaned.

"Got yuh plumb hog-tied around my neck, so's I can't git yuh loose," he grumbled. Then he turned to the preparation of a meal.

The bad men had suffered. Their city shoes were worn through the soles and their feet were swollen and throbbing. Soft of muscle and unaccustomed to the hardships of the mountain trails, they were like helpless children. They ate ravenously everything that Jess handed out to them, but happiness had bidden the old prospector a cold and haughty adieu.

When they had finished eating and fallen back on the ground, Jess squatted beside the fire.

"What yuh doin' up here?" he demanded. It was the sort of question one hillman does not ask another, yet Jess did not hesitate. "What's yer names an' whar'd yuh come from?"

They were in a better mood.

"Bank at Lewiston loaned us a bunch of money, and we brought it up here to get away from holdups," one of them sneered.

"Bet yuh done somethin' that's got yuh all nervous," Jess surmised.

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PETE stalked up to camp and the two visitors scrambled painfully to their feet, cursing, ready for flight.

"I'll kill that beast," one of them informed Jess, seizing a chunk of wood.

"Reckon not," Jess interposed mildly, but his hand was on his gun.

The burro eyed the fugitives, brayed a tentative question to his master, and drifted away, feeding. Jess went out into the gathering dusk and sat down on a fallen log to commiserate with himself, while Pete came up and stood beside him.

When he could figure no way out of his trouble, he rolled up in his blanket, apart from the camp, and slept fitfully until daybreak. The bandits aroused as he stirred about, preparing a meal, but they took no part in the activities until he set the food off the fire, piping hot.

"Come an' git it, yuh rattlesnakes," he invited, with open hostility. "That's the last time I'm goin' t' grub yuh up."

The three of them ate in silence. Then Jess sorted over the supplies again and stacked a pile on the ground.

"Thar yuh are," he informed them, when he had completed the task. "Now I reckon they ain't no reason fer yuh buttin' in on me an' Pete."

The two watched him load the remainder of his outfit onto the burro, making no comment even when he headed out of camp. But as soon as he had gone from sight they got into action.

Jess, hidden in a clump of pine saplings, watched their movements, shaking a fist at them. When they were close to him he stood out in the trail.

"Yuh git back!" he shouted angrily. "Yuh ain't goin' t' dog arter me."

They stopped and sat down.

Jess hurried on, vanishing into the wilderness. Half an hour later he left the trail, choosing a zig-zag course up a steep mountain slope toward the ridge. He climbed steadily for two hours, until he came to the timber line, then went on out along the base of a cliff. Here, in the questionable shade of the rock wall he paused to rest. He was chuckling to himself.

"Reckon we ditched 'em that time," he addressed Pete, biting off a chew of tobacco, dividing the last of his treasured supply.

PETE wheeled and faced back along the way they had come and Jess watched him suspiciously.

"What yuh actin' that'away fer?" he demanded hoarsely.

But in his heart he knew, with a sickening certainty that was confirmed five minutes later. Out from the timber line staggered two human beings, their shoulders drooping, their packs abandoned. When they saw Jess they stopped and sank to the ground, apparently giving him no attention.

"Shake a hoof, Pete!" Jess snapped irritably. And the march was on again, to the grim finish.

The bandits got wearily to their feet and followed.

That night, high up on the mountain ridge, Jess camped beside a snow bank and distilled water over a fire. The outlaws, not far behind him, came boldly into the circle of light and drank greedily of the water and helped themselves to food.

"Yuh better git out o' here," Jess warned them after they had filled themselves, speaking for the first time. "Grub's gittin' low."

They made no move and Jess drew his gun.

"I done more'n anyone else'ud a done," he said. "Give yuh my grub 'till I ain't hardly got none left. Now yuh can move. They's water in the canyon, an' fish in the water, an' berries on the bushes, an' yuh got matches. Move!"

They were beyond persuasion. The day's journey up the backbone of the divide had been almost more than they could endure. They refused to budge, stretching out on the ground with their eyes closed.

Jess stuck his gun back in its holster and rolled up in his own blanket.

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ANOTHER day found Jess a bit haggard, but filled with a firm determination to unshackle his burden.

"Yuh move long's I'm in sight an' I'll drill a hole clean through both o' yuh," he warned, as he loaded Pete.

"We'll stick along," the leader calmly informed Jess. They were greatly refreshed.

"I'm gittin' out o' this here country an' I ain't waitin' fer no one," Jess went on.

They studied his features and decided to sit where they were and watch him go.

He headed straight along the apex of the divide, going north. When he had traveled for a mile, he veered sharply downward, heading toward a canyon where he could see the silver thread of a river winding through the green blanket of the forest. He urged Pete to greater speed until they came into an ancient gold trail that paralleled the mountain, running north. This was to Jess' liking, for he figured it probably led to some settlement along the river, which would scare his pursuers off. His spirits were rising as time moved along, and presently he was singing. But joy was short lived, for Pete grunted, braced his legs wide apart and set his ears at charge bayonets.

Two tattered and scarred scarecrows blocked the trail, effectively holding up further progress of his one burro outfit along the mountain. Jess grumbled audibly.

"Whar'd yuh come from?" he asked in a daze.

"Watched you go this direction and come down to head you off," came the cool answer from the leader. "We've got to eat. Wish the devil you wouldn't go so fast. Makes it hard on us city guys."

Jess sat down beside the trail and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the palm of a grimy hand.

"Had the seven year itch onct, an' I got rid o' it a durned sight easier," he muttered.

He felt a wave of self-pity welling up inside him and he shook himself. Pitying himself was more than he could stand, and he got to his feet.

"Shake a hoof!" he ordered sharply.

Past experience sent the bandits scrambling into the brush as Pete shook. But when the hill-rat was past, they fell in behind, in close order formation, keeping at a respectful distance, but always within sight.

"If they'd fight er git nasty er try t' steal somethin', so's I could open up on 'em, it wouldn't be so bad," Jess grumbled to himself, as he moved along. It was their eternal silent persistence that was getting under his hide.

A WEEK passed. The trail which Jess had followed had come to naught. Their food had been exhausted days before, and they were living on wild game and berries which Jess supplied, existing under a desperate truce because Jess could not escape and because the bandits were filled with stark fear of starvation should he elude them.

Jess was attempting to work in to some settlement, but he seemed to have lost all sense of location, so that he was not certain where he was. He only knew that he had kept on a steady march, day after day, without sight of a human being, aside from his unwelcome comrades.

Pete, too, hated the intruders, and never overlooked an opportunity to plant a sharp hoof against one of them, or to take a nip at a ragged shoulder. And for each of these the bandits vowed reprisal.

But even the torments of hades have an end, and at last Jess Switzer came to the breaking point, where he knew that he must sever family ties. While the bandits slept, he crept from his blanket into the stilly, dew-drenched night. Crawling on his hands and knees he moved away from the vicinity of the others. Then he stood up and listened intently.

He heard Pete moving about a short distance the other side of the camp, and for a moment his courage faltered. Could he bear to slip away and leave Pete there with those desperadoes?

Yet he dared not take the little beast.

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Already he had tried that on several occasions—to sneak away in the dead of night—and each time the sharp hoofs of the burro had left a trail behind which the outlaws had managed to follow. There was left now only the alternative of making his escape without Pete.

"Yuh got the tecknickey an' yuh got the speed," he whispered a sorrowful farewell to his friend of the trail. "If yuh jest had some brains we could 'a' figgered this here thing out."

Then he was gone, a flitting shadow in the blacker shadows of the forest night. Once safely free of the camp, he traveled with long, easy strides. And as the night passed, his head came up, his shoulders lifted. Freedom! At last it was his, and he rejoiced, even to the extent of raising his voice in mournful harmony.

"Oh, I come t' a river an' I couldn't git acrost, an' I jumped on a nigger an' thought he was a horse," he warbled.

He stopped. Mention of a horse made him think of Pete.

"Reckon I'll haft t' go back an' git him in a day er two," he grumbled.

Near daybreak he lay down and rested for a few hours, until the sun was well up above the ridges. He had been unconsciously following a dim game trail during the night, but within a few hundred yards after he resumed his journey, this suddenly broke into a well beaten government forest trail.

Hope mounted high in his heart, with the assurance that it had to lead somewhere, whichever direction he went. As he expected, it did, only in a little different form than he had anticipated.

He saw coming along the trail toward him a cavalrang of horses and men, at least half a dozen, and the men gave the instant impression of being on a grim mission.

Jess halted and waited for them to come up.

"Howdy!" he greeted, tentatively. The men were not hillmen, Jess was certain. Yet there was something about them which told him that they had been traveling through the mountains for some time. He thought perhaps they might be gold hunters from the city.

They came to a halt, eyeing him.

"Whar bound?" he asked. "Gold?"

The lead man sized him up suspiciously.

"Who are you?" he spat out a question.

"Ain't heard o' no reason fer sayin'," Jess came back blandly.

"Oh, you haven't? Well, I happen to be Sheriff Bob Parsons of Clearwater county, and there's a darned good reason why I want to know, and that sudden."

Jess was unmoved.

"So yer sheriff?" he asked. "Got a star an' papers that sez them things?"

The officer jerked back his coat, showing his badge.

"Wall, who's these others?" the hill-rat wanted to know.

"Deputies. Who are you, and where did you come from?"

"I'm Jess Switzer, an' I come from over t' Normand," the prospector vouchsafed.

"Oh," the sheriff recognized the name. "You're the bird who started that fake gold rush over to that old ghost city a while back, are you? Good thing you cleared out of there when you did. That gang was aching to string you up to a tree."

"I didn't tell 'em t' come in thar," Jess argued.

"That's neither here nor there," Sheriff Parsons went on. "We've been out scouring this whole region for nearly three weeks now, looking for a pair of the worst murdering bandits that ever broke loose. Robbed the bank and murdered three men in town. Then headed up here into the hills. Every outlet is being watched, so we know they are still in here somewhere. We've even come onto their trail two or three times."

"What sort o' lookin' critters be they?" Jess asked. A blinding light of understanding had come to him with the first words of the sheriff.

"Middle aged. Heavy set couple, snarling brutes. They would kill for a nickel. Bad eggs clean through. There's a ten thousand dollar reward ready for the man who turns them over to the law."

Jess's heart began to pound. Ten thousand dollars. It was more money than there was in the whole world, so far as his positive knowledge was concerned. Ten thou-

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sand dollars— Eureka! The end of the rainbow!

But he was suspicious of any such good news as that.

"Is that all gold?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"An' could I have it paid right over t' me?"

"What are you driving at?"

Jess' eyes were sparkling with growing excitement. Ten thousand dollars!

"I got 'em!" he fairly shouted. "I got them two. I had 'em fer two weeks. I can't git rid o' 'em."

The sheriff showed real interest then.

"Where?" he demanded sharply, his right hand dropping down to his gun. "Come on. No funny work, now!"

"I got 'em!" Jess chanted. "Yuh write down on a piece o' paper with yer name, that I can have ten thousand dollars o' gold, an' I'll take yuh to 'em."

Sheriff Parsons did not hesitate.

The triple murder for which the outlaws were wanted had roused the entire Northwest. With him it was an absolute imperative necessity that he bring them in dead or alive, or not come in.

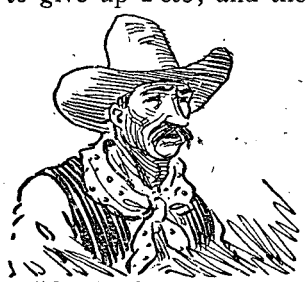
"Come on. Get started," he ordered curtly, when Jess had placed the piece of paper in his pocket.

Jess turned in the trail and led the way back over the course which he had taken.

When he had come to within half a mile of the camp, he called a halt, and the sheriff and members of his posse dismounted.

"They're right down thar," Jess informed them. "They'll be settin' down thar waitin' fer me t' come back."

He was happy, for he would not have to give up Pete; and there was a fortune waiting for him, that he had been trying to shake from him for two weeks. He began to sing, and the sheriff kicked him sharply.



"Ouch! What yuh do that fer?" he demanded, his pride hurt.

"They will know we are coming," the sheriff hissed at him.

"They'll think it's only me, an' they'll be durned glad I'm comin' back, yuh bet."

"Go ahead then."

Jess went. He raised his voice to the highest pitch.

And almost instantly, from down the canyon there came the joyous response, like an echoing accompaniment, the soulful braying of the burro.

"Thar yuh go," Jess broke off, storming, "*allus* buttin' in when I sing."

He hastened his footsteps, the others following close behind him, their hands on their guns. From a little open knoll, across which the trail wound, they could look down into the camp. Standing there, Jess studied the lay of the land. The others, crouching behind him, gasped.

A comedy was being enacted down there that held them breathless.

The two outlaws, with heavy clubs, had set upon Pete, the burro, with intent to kill. They had crept upon him from either side, and one struck a blow. That was the signal for a glorious free for all, for Pete wheeled, and with hoof and teeth he was defending himself.

Jess laid his hand on his gun and began to count, but before he had finished, he saw that his interference was unnecessary. Pete had the situation well in hand.

Two disgruntled, murderous human beings were fleeing for their very lives, while Pete assisted them with every ounce of his strength, nipping at the seats of their pants. They were coming straight along the trail, toward the point where Jess and the officers were ambushed.

"Wall, I'll be a wood louse!" Jess gasped. "Would you see the way good old Pete's puttin' them fellers out o' camp?"

The sheriff stood up beside Jess.

"I see the way he is driving that ten thousand dollars in gold straight into my arms," he snapped, gripping the butt of his gun, while his deputies lined themselves along the trail.

The wildly racing trio was almost upon them, and Jess, in his excitement, shouted aloud to Pete. The burro checked himself, looking about with a pleased grunt. Then he saw Jess and gave up the chase to

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hurry toward him, switching his tail with eager pleasure, at the return of his master.

But on the trail another mad scene was being enacted. The officers, swinging their guns, had charged to meet the bandits, who, taken by surprise, could only lunge forward to the battle. The bloody encounter was short and furious. Almost in the twinkle of an eye, the outlaws lay there safely bound, while the officers gloated.

"Yuh kin give me the gold now," Jess suggested mildly, advancing toward them. "Reckon me an' Pete'll be movin' on."

The sheriff looked at the hill-rat and sneered.

"Where d'y get that stuff?" he snarled greedily. "Them's our prisoners. We caught 'em."

Jess reached out a hand and laid it on Pete's neck, his mild eyes puzzled.

"Knowed they was some ketch in it," he opined to his long eared buddy. "After yuh an' me done all the work."

Pete, standing beside his lord and master, with legs spread wide twitched an ear and looked belligerently at the minions of the law.

"'Tain't no use," Jess spoke to the burro. "It's them agin me. Well—shake a hoof, Pete!"

Pete shook as he never shook before.

Eyes bulging, a grunt of rage rumbling from his vocal tract, he lunged forward, straight at the officers.

The sheriff and his deputies saw him coming, and into their minds there flashed a vision of that wild charge of the bandits up the trail. They had no time to draw guns, or even to think. They started down the mountainside because it was easier going. And they didn't mean maybe. They, each and every one, had some place to go, and they were in a darned big hurry to get there, with a demon from the jackass' hell scorching their heels.

Jess sat down beside the captive bandits and pondered. Thirty minutes later he heard Pete grunting and groaning along the trail, and then he felt a friendly muzzle against his cheek.

He reached up and affectionately twisted a long ear that was tickling his nose.

"Yuh sure got the tecknickey an' yuh sure got the speed," he complimented the burro, "an' durned if yuh ain't got the brains, too, figgerin' out how t' git rid o' them double crossers. Only now I got t' figger out how t' tote them twins o' trouble clean into town an' meet up with that 'er gold reward."

Shaking his head, he unbound the fetters about the legs of the prisoners and boosted them onto the back of his sturdy but complaining friend of the trail.

The past was forgotten; the present had taken care of itself. Only the future, filled with the rosy glow of gold, remained.

"Shake a hoof, Pete!" he ordered happily.

And Pete shook.

In the next issue

When the great tornado struck St. Louis, the Miller garage outfit was right in its path—

Bravery and Brick

by

Kerry Ralston

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THE BLUE HOUND

By THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS

Author of "Turn About's Fair Play," "The Crumpit Bull," etc.

HE WAS A MYSTERY, THAT BLUE HOUND OF ANDY CANDLE'S, BUT HE WASN'T THE ONLY MYSTERY IN THE BACKWOODS OF NEW BRUNSWICK. WHERE HAD OLD PINCHER CANDLE HIDDEN HIS MONEY, FOR INSTANCE? THIS WAS ANOTHER OF THE PUZZLES THAT ENTERED INTO THIS STORY OF HUNTING DOGS, WOODS TACTICS AND YOUNG ANDY'S INHERITANCE

THAT she was a purebred Irish setter of a superior and expensive strain nobody doubted; and she soon proved that her qualities of head and heart were equal to her breeding. But of her history nothing was known though much was supposed.

"She came in with a rich sport, one of these here wing-shootin' woodcockers," said Sam Noddy. "She went huntin' off through the alders, farther an' farther; and he hadn't sense enough to keep her in sight nor to keep in sound of the little bell on her collar. There's plenty of good dogs owned by durned fools. He'll be back for her nex' year or advertisin' for her. I wouldn't wonder; and maybe he'll get her and then agin maybe he won't."

Sam had found her in the fall of the year, with her forepaw in the jaws of a rusty fox-trap. He had carried her home and treated the injury so ingeniously and with such painstaking care that she was as lively as a cricket within the month. Though the paw was badly scarred, it did not cripple her. Sam named her Trap; and he and his family felt uplifting pride in the possession of the only purebred dog on Candle Creek. They were fond of her, too; and their affection grew daily.

Mrs. Noddy once said, "Trap's got as good sense an' better manners than most folks hereabouts—meanin' nothin' personal."

That winter passed without bringing sight or word of the red setter's rich owner to Candle Creek. Spring came and warmed into summer; and still the Noddys remained in undisputed possession. Having ran into harvest, and harvest into the laborious season of potato-digging. Sam cleaned his gun one night; and next morning he shouldered it, whistled to the eager Trap and headed for an old hauling-road which he knew to be a favorite resort of partridges. He hoped that Trap would forget her high and foreign habits and education and behave like an ordinary "partridge dog"—that is to say, that she would smell out the birds on the ground and dash at them with such vigor as to frighten them into the branches of adjacent trees and hold them there, fascinated by her yelps, until he could come up and bang at them. But he had seen a few of these superior dogs at work, and he had misgivings.

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TRAP went into a strip of alders and stood like a graven image.

"There she goes!" said Sam, disgusted and nervous. "Woodcock, I bet a dollar—and it'll go straight up in the air like a busted bed-spring. An' she'll look for me to shoot it an' it goin' so goldasted quick the devil himself couldn't see it!"

At the sound of his voice, the big setter advanced three paces. He followed her, his gun clutched nervously before him in both hands.

"You'll be disapp'inted," he said. "You'll be fair shamed of me. I never had the time to practice none of this fancy shootin'—but put a partridge onto the limb of a tree for me and I'll hit 'im every crack."

Trap flushed the cock. Up went the brown bird, like something propelled by a released spring. And Sam brought the gun to his shoulder and loosed the right-hand charge. Did he aim? Not that he was aware of. Did he calculate speed and distance and direction? Not to his knowledge. He simply let fly, without hope, just to let Trap know that, despite his limitations as a fancy gunner, he was willing to oblige. The woodcock was not in sight. But that meant nothing to him, as he had lost sight of it even before he had pressed the trigger. Trap vanished in the alders. Sam felt an urge to turn and walk away, to hasten away. But he stood his ground.

"You won't find it," he said. "Not if you hunt yer head off. I'm only a bushwhacker. I shoot them settin' in trees and standin' on the ground. I can't hit 'em flyin'—like rich sports do."

THEN Trap reappeared, wagging her red plume and holding something delicately in her long jaws. She deposited the brown woodcock at his feet, its plumage unruffled, and looked up at him with admiring congratulation in her eyes.

"It must of flew right into it," said Sam, in a dazed voice.

That was the beginning of it—of the change in Sam Noddy's methods as a gunner, which astonished his acquaintances at first, and amused some of them for a time, and finally won the admiration of all.

Trap's next offering was a partridge—a ruffled grouse, to be exact—which went off like an explosion in extra thick cover. Sam missed it clean. He fired too late, too wide and too high. But Trap was nice about it. She gave him a look which said, "That was an impossible shot." The third was also a partridge. Flushed at the edge of the covert, it took to the open glade instead of to the tangle. Its luck was out and Sam's was in.

"It ain't as hard as it looks," said Sam.

The fourth was an opportunity for a right-and-left. A brace of birds went up together, from the edge of a clearing, and zoomed across the open on diverging lines. Sam had heard of right-and-lefts. He had even seen one made, years ago, by a retired major. The major had pulled on the farthest bird first, and smacked it down, and then swung and given the left barrel to the other. Sam had never forgotten it. But it called for speed—for quick thought and quick action—for twice as much of everything as a single shot. Which of the two birds was farthest off? He could not decide. Both were far and swiftly getting farther. He realized the pressing need of haste. He cocked both hammers; and he let fly, right and left simultaneously, at the autumnal air midway between the swiftly diminishing birds. Why? He himself could not have explained the action. Trap did not know. She looked at the sky, at the gun, at Sam's apologetic face; and her eyes wore a puzzled expression for the next fifteen minutes.

By November, Sam could smack them down out of the air as if he had been born to it. The harder they flew, the harder they hit the ground.

No word came to Candle Creek of the red setter's original owner. Winter took hold, hung on, blew through and thawed away.

Trap's five pups came in March. Two of them promised to resemble the mother; and two looked more like their sire, which was Bill McDonald's dog Spot. If Spot was any more one thing than several others he was a pointer. The fifth pup gave no promise of ever developing even the

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slightest resemblance to either of his parents.

Young Andy Candle came over to look at Trap and her pups. Trap and the whole Noddy family liked Andy. All dogs and most people liked him, for that matter; and all were sorry for him because he was an orphan and lived with his grandfather old Pincher Candle.

"I'm keepin' the two red fellers," Sam explained to Andy. "Bill wants the two patchy ones. Guess I'll give the little blackish feller away. He don't zackly look like he belonged to the family. He's a mystery, that's what he is."

"Would you give 'im to me?" asked the boy. Excitement and longing shook his voice and cracked it to a ragged whisper. "Say, I sure do want a dog! I—I'd be good to him, Sam."

"Sure you'd be good to 'im, Andy, but what about yer gran'pa? He wouldn't have a dog on the place. You know *him,* Andy—better'n I do—or worse. He wouldn't keep even a cat if it wasn't for the free mice."

"That's right, but I'd hide 'im away somewheres so the old man wouldn't know about 'im. I could feed him on trout all summer an' snare rabbits for 'im nex' winter. The old man ain't as spry at gettin' 'round as he used to be. He can't see extry good without his specs, an' maybe he'll lose his specs. And he's gettin' kinder deef, too."

"I'd like fine to give it to you, Andy, only I wouldn't want to add to yer troubles."

But the boy pleaded, and Sam Noddy, who had a soft heart, at last promised to give him the little blackish pup as soon as it was old enough to part from its mother.

II

TO SAY that old Pincher Candle was a miser is to tell less than half of it, less than half of it, less than a quarter of it. There are amiable misers. There are even generous misers—generous with good advice, moral support, their time and their trouble, everything except their money. But old Pincher was not that kind. His heart and his soul were as tight as his fingers. In contemplating his money, he derived more pleasure from the thought that other people had to do without it than from the knowledge of his own possession. Mean, that's what he was. And stupid. Pincher Candle was and had always been. Had he been normal in heart and mind he might have had scores of thousands of dollars in banks instead of two or three thousands hidden away in secret corners. But to have made a fortune he would have had to give opportunities to others to make something in the way of wages and what-not. So, rather than help others, he had been satisfied with the few mean dollars he could pinch off, here and there, with his own fingers. He had worked his son; and, after his son's death by misadventure in the woods, he had worked the boy Andy; and that had been the extent of his employment of labor. Well, not quite. There had been his wife for a time, and his son's wife later.

Anybody but Pincher would have thrived on that old Candle property as it had been when Pincher inherited it. Consider the timber—the towering spruce and hemlock. It had called for a big operation—but Pincher, begrudging wages, had gnawed at it single-handed. It had been old timber even then. Every high wind played havoc with it. Later, Pincher and his only son had nibbled at it, getting out a hundred logs when thousands should have been dragged out. When a January gale crashed a third of those ancient trees, Pincher received no sympathy. When fire completed the destruction five years later, sending thousands of dollars' worth of prime spruce and hemlock up in smoke, people justly remarked, "Sarve 'im damn' well right!"

Consider his fifty acres of meadow along the creek—the best hayland in many weary miles. It grew more grass—timothy and clover and bluejoint—than he and his unfortunate son could cut and "make." Rather than hire help, he sold off some of his horned cattle and let that rich land revert to alders and willows.

ANDY cut across to the Noddy place at every opportunity, to visit Trap and her pups, even if he could only remain a minute and had to run both ways. He thought of that small, blind, hungry, pot-bellied dog of his all day and sometimes

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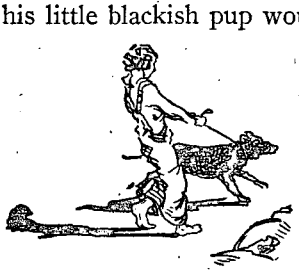
dreamed of it at night. He had tremendous faith in it. He admitted that it was now the smallest of the litter, but he firmly believed that it would be the biggest, some day. He had to admit that it bore no resemblance to a pure-breed Irish setter, and none to a more or less pointer, but he knew that it was the best pup of the five. What should he name it? He gave a great deal of thought to that important question. He wanted a distinguished and unusual name, a suitable name for what would soon be a distinguished and unusual dog. And he found a name, quite by chance.

In the loft of a disused barn, where he was preparing one of several hiding places in readiness for the home-coming of the pup, he discovered an old horsehair box containing a dozen tarnished metal buttons and a rusty spur and a mildewed book. He had never seen or heard of the box before, but he supposed that it had been stowed away in the loft, and forgotten, when the original homestead on Candle Creek had been destroyed by fire many years before his birth. He looked into the yellow, mottled pages of the book. It was about soldiers. He turned the pages. It was all about soldiers and battles and sieges. He read eagerly; but he read slowly, for the light was bad and his education had been neglected. For ten minutes his dog was out of his thoughts. And then he came upon what he wanted and recognized it as such in a flash.

Captain William Jenkyn, of the Border Dragoons, who was acting that day as an extra galloper to General Hill, had two horses killed under him and was himself wounded . . . .

There it was! Galloper! Could you better that for a name for the kind of dog his little blackish pup would be some day?



Galloper.

Galloper was quick and strong on his legs, with an amusing appearance of clumsiness, and able to eat almost anything, before Sam Noddy allowed Andy to take him away. Even then, Sam let him go with misgivings, for he could not see how the boy was going to handle the situation. But Andy was confident that he could hide the pup's very existence from the old man and at the same time enjoy the pup's society and raise him as a good dog should be raised.

It was eleven o'clock at night when Andy took Galloper home. He had left his bedroom by way of the window and the lean-to roof of the woodshed; and he regained that haven by the same route, with the pup in his arms.

Pincher Candle slept in a little room off the kitchen. It was his unpleasant morning habit to rise much earlier than there was any need of, and hammer on the pipe of the kitchen stove with a poker until he was quite sure that Andy was wide awake. He always enjoyed this prelude to the day, remembering how deep and sweet a thing was the slumber of youth. He would then return to his bed, where he would sit bolt-upright until he heard the boy clattering the stove-lids; after which he would peep around the edge of the window-blind until he saw Andy on his way to the milking. He woud lie back then and doze lightly until breakfast was ready.

On a certain May morning it looked to the old man, peering around the edge of the cotton blind, that his grandson was carrying more than a milk-pail toward the barns. It looked to him as if the lad held something dark under his right arm. His jacket? No, he'd be wearing his jacket at this chilly hour. Pincher reached for his spectacles. The spectacles were not on the little table beside his bed. They were not on the dressing table. They were not on the window ledge. Had he left them in the kitchen? He pulled on his boots and extended his search.

WHEN Andy returned with the milk he found the old man up and waiting for him.

"Where's my specs?" demanded Pincher.

"Where would they be?" returned Andy.

"None o' yer sass! Ain't you seen 'em?"

"Seen 'em las' night.'

"Where?"

"On your face."

"Well, they ain't there now. An' I don't want none o' yer sass, Andrew Candle. I'm yer gran'father, mind that. Fry the pan-

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cakes an' then find me my specs."

Andy left Galloper in a retreat at the back of the cow stable and was in a hurry to rejoin him. So he fried the pancakes in record time and then found the spectacles in five minutes.

"Where was they?" asked the old man.

"Under your bed."

"Say, I must of knocked 'em off the table in my sleep."

Andy ate his breakfast even faster than usual.

"What's yer hurry?" asked Pincher, regarding him suspiciously through the bright specs.

"Got to mend them fences."

"And maybe you got to go fishin'?"

"You want me to go fishin', I guess. Where'd we get a cheaper dinner than a mess of trout?"

"Well, I didn't say you couldn't go fishin'— Say, what d'ye reckon y're doin', anyhow—sneakin' pancakes into yer pocket?"

"I'll maybe want a snack before dinner. It don't make no diffrunce in the cost, *when* I eat 'em."

PINCHER let it go at that. Whenever rheumatism had hold of him by the knee or the neck he realized the necessity of allowing a little give and take in argument with the boy. Sometimes it grabbed him by neck and knee simultaneously with red-hot fingers; and at such times he sweated at the thought of what would happen to him if Andy should up and quit him cold. He would be forced to hire, in that case; and well he knew what that would mean in wages and victuals.

Andy walked out with an ax on his shoulder and cold pancakes in the pockets of his ragged jacket. When a corner of the old sheepshed hid him from the kitchen window he changed his course. He entered the stable from the rear; and there was Galloper, wriggling and jumping to welcome him. The pup had commenced his breakfast on a pint of warm milk. Now he finished it on cold pancakes. They went from there to a point of fence which needed attention, keeping out of sight of the house all the way. Galloper gambolled like a lamb; and the boy laid the ax aside every now and again and gambolled with him. After about an hour and a half on the fences, they returned to the back of the old barn for angle worms and a rusty can to contain them and an ancient discarded frying pan. The soil was rich behind those barns and the worms were plentiful and stout. From there they took the shortest way to the sappy woods.

Galloper rolled on the wet moss and jumped and frisked in the budding underbrush. Suddenly he set his muzzle to the ground, and a quiver went through him from his nose to the tip of his tail. He uttered a whining yelp and sped away. Andy was astonished. Andy had seen Trap work; and this behavior of Galloper's was nothing like it.

"More like a hound nor a setter," he said. "And he's after a rabbit. Hark to 'im—yappin' and runnin' fit to bust himself. That ain't like his ma—nor like his pa, neither. More like a blood-hound. Here he comes circlin' round. Say, can he run? Bet yer boots he can run!"

A rabbit crossed the path with one flop

of its long hind legs. It did not appear to be in desperate haste. Galloper crossed about fifteen seconds later, head down and tail up. Again they circled. Though they were lost to the boy's view, he was kept aware of the course of the chase by the pup's whimpering yelps. The rabbit reappeared only to vanish again in a flash of the eye. It was laying on its big pads to the earth in earnest now. Half a minute passed before Galloper crashed from cover and into cover again. Still his head was down and his tail up.

"You're too young yet, an' too little," said Andy. "That's a growed-up rabbit. But wait till ye're as old as him an' I bet you'd be onto 'im in five jumps."

Again the hare ran a wide circle and the pup circled after him. Upon its third appearance, the quarry had such a safe lead that it sat up in the path for a few seconds and wagged its ears. As it hopped on its way again, Andy whistled urgently and called his pup by name; and when Galloper emerged from the bushes, Andy was

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right there to seize him in his arms.

"That's plenty of that," said the boy. "He was only playin' with you. You don't want to go an' get all tuckered out at your age, chasin' full-growed rabbits, an' you only a baby yet. But you done fine, Galloper. You kep' right on his track all the time, the same as a blood-hound you might read about in a book."

While Andy fished, Galloper hunted. Andy yanked sixteen nice trout out of the brown water without traveling more than two hundred yards. Galloper ran miles, and got nothing for his trouble but the exercise. Andy made a small fire and cleaned and fried four sizable fish, while the pup looked on with frank interest.

"You get one of these now, jist to keep up your strength, an' t'other three for supper, you great, big, gallopin' blood-hound you."

The pup relished the fried trout. With his eyes and tail and quivering hide and gaping jaws he said, plain as words, "I'll eat the rest of them now, and save you the trouble of carrying them home."

"No you won't," his master replied. "Enough's plenty. You wouldn't want to grow up with that pot-belly still on you, I reckon. How'd you ever catch a wolf—if there was any wolves to catch—or a fox, or even a rabbit, an' you big as a bar'l?"

IT WAS noon when they got back to the farmstead. Andy put Galloper in the retreat at the back of the stable again and hid the three fried fish wrapped in birchbark. He warned the pup to be patient and good and to keep quiet. Then he took the twelve remaining trout up to the house. He found his grandfather sitting close to the stove.

"Time you was back," snapped Pincher. "Left without fillin' the woodbox an' I been out scrabblin' round for firin' on my lame knee. Got some trout, did you? You was away long enough to catch a thousand of 'em, Lord knows!"

Andy cleaned the fish and set the frying pan on the stove.

"You went an' spilt about a quart of milk this mornin'," continued the old man. "Milk's money. Money's life."

The boy wanted to tell him that there would be plenty of milk if there was decent feed for the cows; and that he had not spilled a quart of milk, but had given a pint to his dog; and that he was just about sick of being driven like a slave and dressed like a scarecrow and kept home from all the sprees and barn-dances. But he didn't. Without a word, he went right on frying trout in one pan and potatoes in another. He had discussed his unhappy situation often with Sam Noddy and Mrs. Noddy; and they had advised him strongly to continue to bear with Pincher and his ways.

"Maybe it won't be for long," Sam had said. "You'd be bitin' off yer nose to spite yer face, as it's wrote down in the Good Book. And if you was to quit the old man now you're a chunk of a lad goin' on fifteen an' him crippled half the time with rheumatics, it would kinder set folks agin you. Not that they got a mite of respect or likin' for Pincher Candle, an' not that one an' all don't pity you for the way he treats you—but some folks is that contrary. The only way you can get square with him for all the times you've been lonesome an' hungry an' overworked is to stop right with 'im to the last. He is yer gran'pa. Ye're his only kith and kin—the last Candle on Candle Creek. All he's got will be yours some day."

SO ANDY continued to cook the dinner in silence. He said to himself, "I got a good dog, anyhow. Scold away, you old fool. You worked pa an' ma to death, but you're too old now to work me to death. Begrudge my dog a pint of milk, would you, like you begrudged it to me when I was a baby an' raised hell when my ma wanted a taste of chicken broth when she was sick? But you can't kill me, nor you can't scare me any more like you used to."

He went back to his work on the fences after dinner, taking Galloper with him. Galloper chased more rabbits. Andy worked until nearly six o'clock, then milked, gave the pup his supper of cold fried trout and warm milk, split and carried in wood, fried pancakes and salt pork for Pincher and himself. He did not say a word during the consumption of those uninspired victuals; and the old man spoke only once. The old man said, "Long's as I've lived I never see no two men could eat more'n you can single-handed." Then Andy washed the

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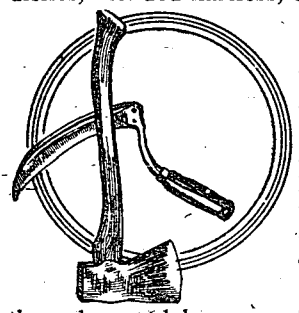
dishes, mended harness, darned a few pairs of socks and sewed a patch on his pants. It was ten when he was free to go up to his bedroom. But he did not turn in. He sat on the edge of the bed for half an hour, then departed by way of his window and the roof of the woodshed. He returned by the same way ten minutes later, with Galloper under his arm.



That blackish gray, hardhaired pup had brains. His head was full of them, and he knew how to use them. He had not been a resident of the old Candle place a week before he had worked out the true state of affairs in relation to Pincher Candle and himself and his hero and master Andy. He had put two and two together, and three and three. He knew the old man by sight and scent and ear; and he understood, by Andy's behavior, that he was not to let the old man see him, or smell him, or hear him. Andy's wish was his law. He could not think why Andy wanted him to hide from Pincher, but he supposed that Pincher was dangerous in some way; so he hid. He made a game of it and got almost as much fun out of it as out of his games with Andy and his pursuit of rabbits. It was an easy game to play so long as the old man was kept in, and close to the house by his lame knee. It became difficult as warm weather soothed and limbered the knee.

Andy put in the whole crop that year with the one old horse, Jim. Both he and Jim did their utmost, but it was not much of a crop—a few acres of buckwheat, a few acres of oats, a patch of potatoes and a patch of garden. They were harrowing in the last of the buckwheat when Pincher appeared suddenly at the edge of the field. The boy drew rein and looked swiftly and apprehensively around. Galloper was nowhere in sight. The old man advanced a short distance onto the tillage, then halted and beckoned. Andy went over to him, leaving the old horse sagging sleepily with every hip and shoulder on a level of its own. Pincher wore his spectacles. His pale eyes looked very keen and suspicious behind the bright lenses.

"What dog was that?" he asked.

AGAIN the boy looked all around, and again he saw nothing of Galloper.

"I seen a dog," continued the old man. "He was trailin' along with you."

"What of it?" returned the boy. "You don't see 'im now, do you?"

"I seen 'im all right. He was actin' kinder puppish. What was he doin' here, that's what I'm askin' you—an' where'd he come from?"

"Did you have your specs on?"

"Now looky here, young man, keep in mind who ye're speakin' to. Yes, I had my specs on, an' I got 'em on now. They're good specs; an' I see guilt an' shame an' lies all over your face! Guilt an' lies, plain as print! You went an' got yerself a dog, that's what happened. No good yer lyin' to me. Ain't you been hankerin' for a dog this long while back? An' ain't I told you never to bring one onto the place? Don't lie to me! I kin read yer tricky face like a book. Now I know what's been happenin' to the milk, an' the pork, an' the—the—all the victuals."

"Pork!" cried Andy. "He never tasted your old pork! Milk an' buckwheat's all I ever gave 'im of yours, an' I reckon——"

"Hah! So you *hev* got a dog!"

"Yes, I have; and if you could read my face like you say you can, an' knew what I think of you—which is jist what all the neighbors thinks of you, too—you'd go dig a hole in the ground an' stick your head in it!"

"None of yer sass!"

"Sure I've got a dog. An' he's drank your milk and he's et your pancakes—but nobody only yerself would call them yours. Who grew the buckwheat? Who threshed it out an' hauled it to the grist-mill? Who does all the work on this place—for rags even a scarecrow wouldn't wear an' victuals fit for a pig? *Your* milk!"

PINCHER reached and grabbed with the left hand and raised his stick with the right.

"Hit me one lick if you dast," said the boy, in a low voice, standing firm as a rock and staring straight into the old man's

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baleful eyes. "Only one—an' see what happens."

Doubt checked Pincher's savage intention. The upraised stick wavered but remained aloft.

"You belted me plenty last year, an' worse the year before—but I was littler then," continued Andy. "I was littler an' you was spryer. Hit me one lick now, an' then go hire yerself a man—an' pay him a dollar an' a half a day an' feed 'im victuals. Hit me if you dast!"

Neither of them saw Galloper the pup. Galloper had watched Andy and the old man with keen interest from a bushy screen at the far edge of the field. At the upward flourish of the old man's stick, he slipped from cover; and he was on his way.

"D'ye *dare* me?" cried Pincher—and then he let out a desperate yell and dropped his stick and staggered back and fell down. And Galloper loosed his hold on the ankle and tried for a hold on the throat. Milk-teeth are little but very sharp.

Andy jumped and gathered the pup in his arms. Pincher lay and kicked, with his face in the harrowed earth. Andy turned and walked back to the horse. He set Galloper down on the way; and Galloper frisked and barked, in high spirits.

"He could of killed you," said Andy. "You're only a pup. He could of kicked the life out of you, for all his lame leg. Say, you want to be careful. That's a real bad old man."

He unhitched Jim from the harrow.

"Hey, there, Andy!" cried Pincher.

Gran'pa was on his feet again and had recovered his stick.

"Giddup," said the boy to the horse.

"Hey there, Andy! Where you off to?"

Boy and horse and dog held on their course for the stable.

"Hey, you! Hold on a minute."

Andy urged the old horse to a quicker pace. The pup alone seemed to hear Pincher. He turned his head and bristled the hard hair of his neck and withers. Pincher hobbled after them. The horse was in his stall, with hay and oats before him, by the time Pincher reached the door of the stable. Andy was just about to step outside, but the old man blocked the narrow way.

"What's eatin' you, Andy? What struck you deef an' dumb all of a sudden? Say, you ain't finished harrowin' in that buckwheat."

"Finish it yehself. I'm through. Step aside an' lemme out of here—me an' my dog."

"Now looky here, Andy, that ain't reasonable nor sensible. I didn't *hit* you—for nigh onto a year. Now be sensible. This here's yer home, where you was born an' raised like yer father before you."

"A year! Don't forget last Christmas—when you belted me with a hame-strap till the skin peeled off for wantin' to go to the school-treat down to the Corners. An' now—now you're scart to bust me 'round—you call me a liar an' a thief. I'm through!"

Andy pushed the old man aside and left the stable, with Galloper bristling at his heels. He went straight over to the Noddy place and told Sam and Mrs. Noddy all about it. Sam tried to talk him into returning and bearing a little longer with old Pincher Candle—but in vain.

"Galloper here'd be in danger of his life every minute, day an' night," explained the boy. "If he didn't shoot 'im he'd p'ison 'im."

"But he's your own gran'pa, Andy," protested Mrs. Noddy. "Folks owes a duty to their gran'parents."

"An' Galloper's my own dog," returned Andy. "I didn't pick Pincher Candle for my gran'pa, but I sure did pick Galloper for my dog. I begged him off of Sam, an' promised I'd always treat 'im right, didn't I, Sam? An' he fought for me when he seen the old man heave his stick like he meant to hit me a lick. I'd fight for him any day, so I reckon a man's got more duty to his dog, the two of 'em bein' real partial to each other, nor he has to a gran'father like Pincher Candle begrudgin' every mouthful he eats an' every minute he ain't workin' like a slave."

SO ANDY and the pup left Candle Creek and moved down river by easy stages in search of a home. The boy felt that twenty miles would be no more than enough to put between Galloper and

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Pincher; and they actually traveled twenty-six—all the way down to Judson Nair's at Grindstone Point. Andy had a letter to Nair from Sam Noddy.

He was a big man, this Judson Nair; and there was more paint on his house and barns than was to be found in the entire settlement of Candle Creek. He wore drooping mustaches, which gave him a mild look; and the boy knew that he had sprained his left wrist sometime or other by its bracelet of dried eel-skin. Having perused Sam's letter standing, he sat down on a convenient sawhorse and tickled Galloper between the ears with a large finger and eyed Andy with a look of polite interest. He did not speak for a full minute; and then he spoke slowly, and in a surprisingly small voice for so large a man.

"Sam's a weak speller," he said, "but education isn't everything—which is about all I learned by going to college. You'll be interested in my books, Andy, and the gold medal they gave me for throwing the hammer. And I have a couple of hounds that'll amuse this fine hound of yours. They went down to the mill with Archie Douglas this morning."

"Is he a hound?"

"No, he's my right hand man. They're Rex and Romper."

"I mean Galloper here. Is he a hound?"

"Yes, undoubtedly—and a good one, at that—but I don't know what kind, exactly. Not fox-hound, like Rex and Romper, certainly."

"His ma's a red setter an' his pa's a kind of pointer. Sam Noddy calls him a mystery."

"A mystery. The world is full of them. But where's your baggage?"

ANDY looked eager and anxious and blank all at once.

"Your trunk, or suitcases, or whatever you transport your wardrobe in?"

"I ain't got none—nor nothin' to put in them if I had. But I don't care about clothes, Mister, if only you'd give me a job, an' a home for Galloper. I'm handy an' reel strong. Say, Mister, I—I'd sure like fine to work here an' see your two hounds an'—an—show you how good I can milk an' churn an' everything—an' say, I'd work from dawn—"

"That's all right, Andy. Why all the excitement? I hired you long ago. Suppose we go in and make a pot of tea."

As for old Pincher Candle back on Candle Creek, he was wild with anger and dismay. For the best part of half a day he forgot all about the rheumatism in his knee and went running around—over to the Noddys' and the McKims' and the Browns' and the Dinwiddies'—raving about what he would do to Andy and that pup if ever he got next to one or both of them again if he was hanged for it. Then the rheumatism caught him by the knee and the neck simultaneously and calmed him down considerably; and Tom Dinwiddie took him home in a wagon.

III

BUD Firkin called himself a sportsman. Others had other names for him. At an early stage of his career he ran a livery-stable on River Street and played poker every night and all day every Sunday in a little room over his office. But the stable business, or the poker business, went wrong—some people said that both developed serious kinks—and Mr. Firkin left Millville for parts unknown.

He returned to his home town seven years later, in a vest that fairly curdled the irises of the optics of the beholders, and opened a poolroom on Steamboat Lane. Some young bloods of the town and vicinity went there to play pool and billiards, and others to play a tall machine by pushing twenty-five cent pieces into a slot and hoping for a little drawer to fly open and offer them a vast accumulation of twenty-five cent pieces. And there was a bar for soft drinks. But if you asked for ginger ale in the right tone of voice, and looked trustworthy, you got what you wanted. Millville's police force walked in one day and walked out with the slot machine. It walked in again a few days later, and out with two demijohns of the difference between Bud's ginger ale and ordinary ginger ale. Bud

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was hurt. He said he was not only willing, but anxious, to stand by the old home-town, but a saint in heaven would not stand for the raw deals that had been handed out to him. Again he went away. Again he came back. And soon. Each return was less spectacular than the one immediately preceding it, each departure left a narrower ripple on the surface of public interest.

Bud Firkin was selling egg-beaters and apple-corers from door to door when Mr. Ed Horne met him one morning and happened to feel and act upon a mild twitch of pity and interest.

"Have a smoke, Bud?"

"Don't mind if I do, Squire."

They lit long cigars.

"Do anything at the races these days, Bud?"

"Wouldn't know a horse from a wheelbarrow at ten paces nowadays. Egg-beaters is my line now. But I wised you to some fast ones in the old days of real sport, Judge."

"I'm not kicking, Budd. I've always been one to take the fast with the slow. But I'll say this—that was a nice pup you sold me seven years ago—that red setter."

"I'll say so. I mind her well. She was worth a whole lot more than what I asked you for her, Squire."

"Naturally."

"Come to think of it, I ain't seen her in years. Did you sell her again, Judge?"

"No. She was stolen again."

"Stolen? You don't say! She was worth real money. Who stole her?"

"I haven't a suspicion, Bud—you happening to be in jail at the time."

"You always would have yer joke, Squire. But that one was sure a great setter. She was worth a fortune. Take her pups—"

"That was the trouble. You know Doc Fowler's big blue stag-hound Robin Hood? She had pups—her first litter—and that stag-hound was the proud father. It would have been useless for him to deny it. They're good dogs, in their own setter-stag-hound ways—but what else? Nothing. And her first litter, mind you! You know enough about the breeding of dogs to see what that means, Bud."

"Sure I know, but I never could understand it. Like as not there'll be a blue stag-hound in her next litter, and the next, and so on, no matter where she is. That would sure knock considerable off her price—if the buyer was wise to it."

"Correct. I don't understand it, either; and I've never read or heard a satisfactory explanation of it—but it's a fact. But I was darned sorry to lose her, for all that. Well, Bud, glad to've run across you. I don't want an egg-beater, but if this will do you any good you're welcome."

"Much obliged, Judge. I always said 'If anybody in this hick town could be called a sportsman and a gentleman it's Ed Horne.'"

MR. FIRKIN reinforced his stock of egg-beaters and apple-corers with an assortment of solid gold watches—the gold was solid as far as it went—diamond rings, pearl necklaces and ruby scarf-pins, and shouldered his pack and set out for rural districts. He headed up-river. He knew that he would have to go a long way before his jewelry would be appreciated at the values he intended to place upon it—right up to the farthest settlements, like as not, where chewing-gum grows on trees, and the extreme of achievement in feminine refinement is to prod a hymn tune out of a parlor organ, and pancake batter is leavened with real yeast out of a jug, and beans are beans. In the less primitive communities through which he had to pass he offered his egg-beaters. Eggs are eggs in all stages of civilization; and the necessity for beating one or more of them is apt to arise anywhere at almost any moment.

But Firkin reached Grindstone Point in the course of time.

ANDY CANDLE was preparing the mid-day dinner, with Galloper and the two-fox-hounds watching him. Judson Nair and Archie Douglas were still afield. It was two years, less one week, since the boy and the pup had left Candle Creek. The orphan was a six-footer now and close onto seventeen years of age. The pup was a dog now, half as big again as either Rex or Romper, with the brow and chest of a mastiff, the jaws of a timber-wolf and a hard, iron-gray coat that suggested blue at certain distances and black at greater distances. Andy sang cheerfully but tune-

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lessly at his work. The door stood open, letting in a broad splash of sunshine and a little flap of wind. Romper went to the threshold and looked out.

"Look what's here," he said, in his mother tongue.

Galloper and Rex joined him. Andy slammed the oven door and strode across and looked out. He saw a stranger approaching from the front gate—a stoutish man with a jacket on his arm, a pack on his back and a brown bowler hat cocked over one ear. A peddler. He nodded and went back to the stove. Galloper and Rex and Rover turned and followed him. A peddler, even a peddler in a sky-blue shirt, was nothing to get excited about. A minute later, the stranger looked in at the door.

"Mornin', Squire," he said. "Grand farmin' weather."

"Sure is," returned Andy. "Step in an' take a chair. Ease your pack onto the floor. Won't be long now before dinner."

The stranger paused in the very act of slipping his shoulders from the straps of the pack.

"Say, you got a grand hound there," he exclaimed.

Andy looked at him and saw that he was looking straight at Galloper, unmistakably at Galloper, with an expression of surprise and very keen interest in his round eyes and pursed lips.

"They're all good," said Andy. "Which one do you mean?"

"The big fellow. The blue-stag hound."

"He's mine. The fox-hounds belong to Mr. Nair. What was it you called him—what kind of a stag hound?"

"Blue. Maybe that ain't the scientifical name, but that's what he is."

"Say, do you know much about dogs? Take the rocker an' ease off. We bin readin' up about them—Judson an' me—but I guess you can't learn everything out of books. But maybe you're an expert?"

"Well, Squire, you might call me all of that. I've owned hounds an' horses in my day. Egg-beaters wasn't always my line. What was it you wanted to know, Squire? Always willin' to oblige, that's Bud Firkin—an' that's me."

"It's about Galloper there—how he come to be a stag-hound, blue or any other color. I wouldn't call him blue exactly. But why ain't he—isn't he—a setter?"

"A setter! What kind of a setter? Why would he be a setter?"

The peddler's interest was obviously on the increase. He brushed the sweat from his eyes with so vehement a gesture that he knocked his hard brown hat to the floor, where it rolled unheeded.

"A red setter. That's what his mother is. And his father's a pointer. Well, a kind of pointer. And Galloper's a blue stag-hound! How could that happen?"

"One of the mysteries of nature. Where'd he come from? Where's the red setter?"

"Candle Crick. Sam Noddy——"

ANDY checked himself, suddenly aware of the peddler's eagerness. Could this battered and nondescript person be Trap's original owner? A peddler of egg-beaters? It did not seem probable. And yet——

Firkin veiled his eyes and sat back in the rocker.

"One of nature's mysteries," he repeated, voice and manner were now casual. "This ain't the first case of the kind I've heard of. Sometimes it's a throwback to some old forgotten strain of blood in the breed, but sometimes agin it might be somethin' else. I never was much acquainted with bird dogs. Never owned a setter nor pointer nor spaniel in my life. Hounds has the most brains, in my opinion. But horses——"

"Sam Noddy's setter has plenty of brains. I ain't sayin' she's got any more than Galloper, nor as much—but she's smart. Sam was down from Candle Crick on the last of the sleddin', and he was tellin' us all about the time he loaned her to Hugh McKim last fall, for a shoot. Hugh had been practicin', with all his family throwin' empty cans up in the air for him to shoot at, and he thought he was a master-hand at hittin' things on the wing. Trap—that's what Sam named his red setter because of findin' her caught in a trap by one paw, but she ain't lame—she put up a woodcock—and Hugh missed it by a mile. She put up some more woodcocks, and he missed them all. Then she tried him

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on partridges, and he missed *them*. Well, she got another scent, and she walked along a piece, and she stood like a rock, and then went ahead more and stood again; and Hugh, he cocked both hammers and followed her up close, with both his eyes stickin' out, till she wouldn't go ahead another step. He looked ahead of her—and she was pointin' at a dead porcupine layin' at the root of a tree. And then she gave him the laugh, so Hugh told Sam—opened her mouth at him an' laughed. Say, can you beat it?"

JUDSON NAIR and Archie Douglas came in, and they all sat up to the table. The peddler talked and ate without easing up on either to give an advantage to the other. He showed himself a man of the world. He talked about everything in the world except dogs. After dinner, he sold Judson three egg-beaters and two apple-corers. He addressed Judson as "Professor" all the time, sensing by his language that he was highly educated, and Archie Douglas as "Laird" (which Archie did not like, never having heard of a laird) and young Andy as "Squire."

"He's an entertaining dinner-guest," remarked Judson, when the peddler was gone, "but I suspect that he was left in four minutes and a half, at least."

"In jail?" queried Archie Douglas.

"Well, I was thinking of boiling water."

"A dash of b'ilin' water wouldn't do 'im a mite of harm.

IV

NOT for a moment did Bud Firkin doubt the identity of the big red setter on Candle Creek. Everything he had seen and heard concerning her at Judson Nair's—her son the blue stag-hound, and the young fellow's stories of her size and sagacity and the unusual accident of the trap—proved her, to his perfect satisfaction, to be that same grand Irish setter which had been stolen from Ed Horne of Millville. The dates were right. Everything was right. There was money in it—somewhere, somehow. Where? How? And how much? These and related questions engaged his quick, crooked and shallow mind as he moved toward Candle Creek at his best pace.

Was there any truth in the story of the trap? A glance at her feet would answer that. Not likely. The young fellow back at Grindstone Point had said that she was not lame. If she was not lame, she was still worth good money. Was this man Noddy the thief? Had Noddy stolen her from Ed Horne? He would know the correct answer to that within five minutes of first setting eyes on Mr. Noddy. He hoped and believed that Noddy was the thief. In that case—well, how much was this Sam Noddy worth? The more he was worth, the less he would like the prospect of jail.

Thus Mr. Firkin reasoned in his quick and crooked brain, hoofing along with a pack on his back and his old brown bowler cocked over one ear, without a glance or a thought for the beauties of nature by which he was surrounded and enveloped. His ears were deaf to the songs of birds and brooks and the wind. The only music he heard was within his own skull—a staccato air set to the inspiring words, "Easy Money, Easy Money." He passed that night at Dunk's Ferry and came in sight of the Noddy house on Candle Creek at suppertime of the next day.

"Now where're they off to in such a hurry an' supper all ready?" cried Mrs. Noddy, as Trap and one of her setter-pointed offspring left the kitchen at top speed and went sailing toward the high-road.

Sam left the roller-towel at which he was drying his face and stepped to the open door and looked out.

"Peddler," he said. "An' he ain't runnin', neither. Durn if he ain't pattin' them! Say, that's queer!"

"What's queer about it? Their bark's worse than their bite. They're friendly enough. Too friendly."

"He's stoopin down an' lookin' reel close at Trap's paws."

The peddler came on, with the friendly dogs trotting before him.

"Stranger to these parts," added Sam. "Looks kinder cityfied—but more like a peddler nor a sport." He stepped outside.

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"Good evenin', Mister. Was you thinkin' the red bitch wanted corn plasters or something?" Twang of suspicion and clang of hostility were in his voice.

BUD FIRKIN had recognized Trap as Mr. Horne's stolen setter at a glance and the truth of Andy Candle's statement at a second glance; and now he saw that Sam Noddy was not the sort that scares easily or lets go his hold on anything easily. He wreathed his tanned face in smiles. Simple smiles, at that.

"Good day to you, Squire. Corn-plasters? No, sir, I got egg-beaters and apple-corers. Oh, now I get you! I was lookin' at the big red feller's feet. Corn-plasters. That's a good one. I seen the white mark on one of his paws and couldn't make it out."

"That's all right," said Sam, vastly relieved. "Step inside an' slip yer pack. Supper'll soon be ready."

Childlike in his simplicity and ignorance—that was Bud Firkin during and after supper; and all the while he was thinking, "I guess he found her in a trap, like the young feller said, but he was sure suspicious of me when he first lamped me. Well, I got to go easy."

Satisfied that nothing was to be feared from the peddler—that the fellow was but little better than a half-wit and as ignorant of Trap in particular as of dogs in general—Sam Noddy had great fun with him. What tales of woodland adventure he told! The more preposterous the story, the better the peddler seemed to like it.

"I'd sure like to live in the woods an' have some excitement," said Bud. "Did you ever meet up with an injun devil, Squire?"

"Injun devil? I'll say I did! Say, that's queer—you happenin' to mention injun devils. It was when I was courtin' Jenny here. One night along towards the latter end of March I was headin' back for home on snowshoes, her old man havin' hove me out as the clock struck twelve, when I suddenly hear a devlish yowl right over my head an' before I can jump, or even say my prayers, somethin' drops on my shoulders an' sticks its claws into my back an' its teeth into my neck." And so on. And so on.

"For shame, Sam!" protested Mrs. Noddy.

Sam looked sorrowfully at the peddler.

"I've showed her the scars a hundred times, but she never will let on that she believes it, because it was her old man's fault it happened, him ejectin' me at midnight," he said.

"Nothin' like that ever happened to me," lamented the simple Firkin.

"I've bin in some tight corners, that's a fact," admitted Sam, "but nothin' to the corners our nex'-door neighbor's bin in and out of. Pincher Candle's his name. There's a grand old character. He'll buy you clean out of egg-beaters; and he'll tell you all his adventures an' feed you on the fat of the land into the bargain."

"For shame, Sam!" exclaimed Mrs. Noddy, who felt sorry for the simple, smiling ignorant fool of a peddler. She turned pityingly to the poor man. "That old Pincher Candle wouldn't buy an egg-beater even if he had a call to beat eggs and it was the last one in the world and only cost five cents," she told him. "He'd beat 'em with his fingers first."

"She's right," admitted Sam, contradicting himself to the peddler as unblushingly as he would if he were telling a fairy-tale to an infant. "She's dead right. That old man would beat eggs with his fingers, supposin' he ever had any call to beat eggs, until they wore right off, sooner'n dig up five cents. Is he near? Say, he's nearer nor the skin to the bone on a starvin' man's shin. He's the champeen mean man of the habitable globe. He's that mean he wouldn't spend a cent to make a dollar. If he wasn't, he'd be a rich man now, rollin' rich, with a fortune in the bank instead of three or four thousands salted down in his socks an' hid away on the place. His meanness killed all his folks only his gran'son an' driv' *him* down to Grindstone P'int. Old Pincher's bin hirin' help ever since—ten lads an' men in two years an' bin without help half the time, at that."

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BUD FIRKIN heard all about old Pincher Candle—all that Sam and Jenny Noddy knew and thought of him, at least. Bud was possessed by a desire, by an urgent craving, to know more about the mean old man and his three or four thousands of dollars. But he did not say so. The keener his interest became, the duller he looked.

Four days later, Sam Noddy went fishing. When he came home at noon he was on the broad grin.

"Say, what d'ye suppose has happened to that half-baked peddler?" he asked. "Give you two guesses."

"Did the injun devils get him?" queried Mrs. Noddy.

"Wrong the first time. Try again."

"Did a bull-moose chase him up a tree?"

"Wrong twice. Worse nor that. He's went an' hired himself out to old Pincher Candle."

"The poor innocent! Well, he can't say that we didn't warn him."

They felt derisive pity for that simple peddler—but both their pity and their derision were misplaced.

Bud Firkin worked as he had never worked before, but he was not unhappy. Pincher Candle drove him from dawn till dark, but he did not pity himself. His temper was frequently ruffled, 'tis true—ruffled to the point of wanting to turn and boot the old man in the stomach—but he kept control of his feet and his temper and chuckled inwardly. Yes, he got a lot of amusement out of that mean, cantankerous, bullying old skinflint; and the more he was amused the simpler he looked.

But when the old man was in bed and asleep, the face of Bud Firkin wore a less innocent expression. But only the mice and the hungry cat saw it then. Only the mice and the cat were aware of the hired man's nocturnal activities—of his noiseless, systematic prying and probing in the loft under the roof, in the cellar under the kitchen, in every room except Pincher's own room and in every cupboard and pot-closet. Even the cat and the mice did not know what he was looking for.

THE search required time as well as the extreme of caution. Some sleep was necessary. An entire night had to be given to sleep every now and then, or nerves would have suffered. Fragments of the dark hours of two weeks were devoted to the exploration of the kitchen alone before Mr. Firkin was unwillingly convinced that he had done full justice to the possibilities of that cheerless and grubby apartment. What he sought was not there, nor in any closet or pantry attached thereto. He had examined everything, including every nail in the floor and every board in the wainscoting, with probing fingers as well as searching eyes. He had drilled the cracks between the boards of floors and walls, and the plaster in a hundred places, with a steel knitting-needle set ingeniously in a wooden handle. He worked faster, though just as thoroughly, in the loft and the cellar. In the dusty chamber directly over the old man's bedroom, he had to practice the same nerve-fraying care as in the kitchen. What with too much work, too little sleep and a diet of buckwheat and pork and potatoes, he lost weight. He began to lose patience, too. Sometimes it was all he could do to refrain from seizing the old man by the windpipe and holding on.

Only two days of July remained when Firkin at last decided that Pincher's own bedroom was the very next place that called for investigation.

"You got plenty of time," he assured himself. "All the time on the calendar—within reason. Slow but sure, Bud. It's got to be a painless extraction. Use yer bean, Bud. Softly does it. You don't want to let the old devil get yer goat now, after all yer work an' worry, an' cheat you out of what's comin' to you."

All of which was easier preached than practised. Pincher Candle was an aggravating old man; and by this time he was riding Bud Firkin's nerves like a flea in a dog's ear. To keep his fingers off that cursed old windpipe, Bud had to put such restraint on himself that the sweat popped and trickled on his face. Bud went to his room over the kitchen early that night, shaking like a leaf, with the old man screaming up from the

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foot of the stairs, "Hey, you! You ain't cleaned out the fryin' pan." He shut the door and flopped on the bed and plugged his ears with his fingers.

Pincher hesitated at the foot of the stairs, then turned and went to his own room, chuckling. Chuckling, mark you! He had been within one jump of hell less than half a minute before and he didn't know it—didn't even suspect it—and went to bed chuckling at his cleverness in bullyragging his simple hired man.

Rain was falling next morning. Firkin went about the milking and the cooking of breakfast in a heavy silence, squeezing his brain for a way of bringing about an opportunity to search the old man's bedroom. But his brain was dry. He could think of nothing but violence. Then the old man himself came to his help.

"Ye'd ought to go fishin' today an' catch us a mess of trouts," said Pincher.

If that had been all, Firkin would have thought nothing more of it than that the old skinflint reckoned a few dozen pan-fish to be of greater economic value than a half-day's work on the woodpile. But that was not all.

"You bin workin' reel hard, an' a bit of sportin' wouldn't do you a mite of harm," added Pincher.

So! The old reptile wanted him out of the way for a spell, did he? But why? What for? The answer came like an inspiration, in a flash.

"I'd like fine to go fishin', but I ain't got no hook-an'-line," replied the simpleton.

"I'll fit you out with tackle; and there's worms for bait back of the middle barn; an' you don't have to stop to wash up the dishes," returned the nice old man.

FIRKIN left the house ten minutes later, with hooks and lines in his pocket and joy and derision in his heart. He entered one of the barns, climbed swiftly to a mow of poles and dragged his pack from beneath a dusty heap of old straw. The pack was the answer—the inspired answer—to his question as to the old man's reason for wanting him out of the way. It had come to him in a flash had that answer, with a sudden illuminating thought of Pincher's frequent queries concerning the whereabouts of the pack. The dirty old thief wanted a chance to rob him of his wire egg-beaters and brass watches. Can you beat it?

HE DESCENDED with the pack and scattered a half dozen pieces of the fake jewelry among the hayseed and dust and straw of the floor. He pushed the remainder of his stock-in-trade, pack and all, out through the back of the barn, by way of a lose board. He hurried out by the door at which he had entered, now with a digger on his shoulder, and made all speed around to the back of the barn as if he were fairly blistering with eagerness to dig the worms and get at the fish. He dug, fast and hard. Worms and earth flew unheeded. He laid his pack in the hole, covered it lightly, then tossed the digger aside and struck out for the woods. As soon as he was in the shelter of the underbrush he turned to his left and moved toward the house, keeping a screen of foliage between himself and the clearing. He halted as soon as he had the kitchen door of the house in view—halted and waited, smiling derisively. He had not long to wait. Pincher Candle issued from the kitchen

and crossed the woodyard and then the barnyard at his best pace and disappeared into the barn so recently visited by Firkin. Firkin moved a g a i n. Still keeping in cover, he hastened around to the front of the house. He darted from the edge of the woods and entered the house by the front door.

There were two mattresses in the miser's bed; and Firkin pinched and prodded both of them—every inch of both of them. If a dime had reposed in either the tick of feathers or the tick of straw, Firkin would have felt it—but not even a dime was concealed there. He subjected the bolster and two pillows to an equally exhaustive prodding and pinching—and with the same lack of result. The ancient dressing-table received his attention next. He pulled out every drawer. He sounded the top, the bot-

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tom and the back in search of a secret compartment. There was no secret compartment. He exhausted the posts and legs of the old bedstead, only to find them solid. He worked faster and faster, his nerves twitching and his temper rising. His handling of the washstand and an old wardrobe was rough and jerky, though thorough. What next? He saw an ancient chair with an upholstered seat. He sprang to it, grabbed it by the back with his left hand and drove the knitting-needle probe into and through the seat a dozen times.

Now only the floor and walls were left—yes, and the window, the casing of which might easily hide the treasure—and precious time was slipping away! How long would the old man keep up his search for the pack? The window was the best chance, but as it overlooked the barns so was it in plain view from the barns. He stooped almost double and went cautiously to the window and peered cautiously out at the misty gray rain. Old Pincher Candle was not in sight. He moved nearer and examined the sill. It was of unpainted pine stained by time and dirt inside the sash and time and weather outside. He fingered it. He put up a hand, then both hands, and tried to raise the sash. But the sash did not move up by so much as an inch.

FIRKIN was squarely down on both knees by this time. He dipped his right hand into his right-hand pocket, drew out his big jack-knife and opened the broad blade. He was about to insert the blade where he judged it would do the most good when something—not a sound, not a touch, not a movement, something, the devil only knows what!—held his hand, checked his heart beats and turned his head slowly, slowly but surely, as if his neck had suddenly become nerveless wood. *And there on the threshold of the doorway behind him stood old Pincher Candle!*

Profound disappointment, crushing as grief, was Bud Firkin's first reaction to that sight. For seconds that dragged like minutes, brain and heart were numb. Then his nerves twanged like cut wires, his released heart pounded and a sudden scorching explosion of hate and rage lifted him and hurled him at the old man. The knife was in his hand. His hand was raised high. Pincher went down like a dummy of rags and sticks—Firkin did not strike. His mind was at work now, quick as lightning, clear as glass. He shut the door beyond the sprawling old man. He yanked the old man to his feet and crushed him into the upholstered chair. He laughed softly. Red fury was gone, but hate and greed remained.

"Now then, Mister, where's your money?"

Pincher began to scream, thin and high—more like a bird or a mouse than a human being. That scream was choked off in his windpipe.

"None of that, or I'll have to kill you. Where's yer money hid?"

"I ain't got no money."

"Spit it out, you old fool."

"It was stole—long ago—so help me God!"

"I got a nice sharp knife here, Mister. Speak up."

"My gran'son stole it."

"This here's a reel sharp knife. Feelin's believin'. How about it?"

The old man cringed and yelped. His face was gray as ashes. His pale lips moved.

"Speak up, Mister. I'm listenin'."

A GHOST of a whisper issued from the bloodless lips. Firkin gave attentive ear. He nodded, grinning.

"That sounds more like it," he said.

He reached back with his left hand, jerked a soiled sheet off the bed, ripped the sheet swiftly and gagged the old man with one strip and bound him to the chair with others. Then he left the room, only to return in half a minute with an ax and a rusty chisel. With these he set to work at the floor, ripping up one board after another.

RAIN seeped down that morning at Grindstone Point even as on Candle Creek.

"I'd like fine to take a couple of days off before we commence hayin', and go up an' see Sam Noddy and his dogs," said Andy Candle, at breakfast. "I'm kind of curious to know if Trap's had any more blue stag-hound pups."

"Go to it," said Judson Nair. "You can take Leather Stocking and the second-best

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buggy. We won't want to start the mower before Monday. If she has, and if it looks anything like as good as Galloper, try to get it for me. I'll go as high as twenty dollars."

Leather Stocking was a leggy five-year-old mare with more than a few drops of Morgan blood in her; and the wheels of the second-best buggy were well greased; and the road was good. The mare stepped out and Galloper loped easily. It was a nice day for stepping out—cool enough and free from dust. It still wanted a few minutes of eleven o'clock, a. m., when they arrived at Sam Noddy's place. They were welcomed warmly by Sam and Jenny and Trap and Trigger.

"It's queer you comin' today," said Sam, after the first excitement. "I kind of had it in my mind to go an' fetch you. I was talkin' to yer gran'pa a few days back an' he told me about his will—about travelin' all the way down to Millville last September an' hirin' a lawyer to make out a will fir 'im. You'd oughtn't to stopped away so long, Andy. But maybe if we was to go over right now, an' you was to promise him to come home an' stop home, he'd maybe make out a new will."

"Why, what's wrong with the will the lawyer made out for him?" asked Andy.

"It gives his farm—the whole b'ilin' of Candle land—an' everything he owns, real an' personal, to the Sassiety for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—the dirty old hypocrite!"

"That suits me, Sam. Only wish he'd j'ined up with that outfit sooner. They're welcome to his land and his money—but even if they wasn't, I wouldn't work for Pincher Candle again not for all the farms on Candle Crick *and* a million dollars. That's straight, Sam; an' I guess I'll go over an 'tell him so before dinner."

They moved off, with the dogs before them, and Sam protesting against Andy's attitude toward his grandfather's property. They had not gone two hundred yards before a wild and insistent scream rang out behind them.

"Jenny! What the hell!" cried Sam Noddy; and they both turned and ran.

There was Mrs. Noddy at the kitchen door, waving her arms.

"He's rode away on yer mare, Andy! There he goes! That peddler—old Pincher's hired man."

There he went, sure enough,

"Sic 'im, Trap!" yelled Sam.

Trap sailed away, with Galloper and Trigger after her. Andy continued to run, too, but not on the same course. He went on a long slant, hoping to reach the high-road in front of the man and the mare. Anger winged his feet; and he was a fast runner even when he was not angry. Now he fairly smoked with anger against the fool who was running a horse that was still warm from a twenty-six mile journey. But the chase had passed and was out of sight by the time he burst from the underbrush and jumped the fence and gained the high-road. He had some of his wind left and all of his anger. He ripped off his jacket and quickened his pace. A minute later, upon rounding a sharp curve in the road, he came face to face with the mare. She was alone and unconcernedly nibbling at the wayside vegetation. A smudge of mud on her face and daubs of the same on her knees indicated the manner of her parting from the rough-riding peddler. Andy examined her knees and was relieved to find the hair and hide intact. But where was the horse-thief and what about the dogs? Just then he heard Galloper give tongue from deep in the woods on the right.

"Galloper's got him treed," he said to Leather Stocking. "And he'll keep him treed till I go look 'im over—or eat 'im up alive if he's fool enough to come down. What d'ye know about that? Guess I got to take you along into the woods with me."

But Sam Noddy arrived on the scene at that moment, driving one of his big roans. Andy explained the situation, handed over the mare and took to the woods. Galloper was still baying.

Andy found the three dogs at the base

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of a sizable spruce, and Bud Firkin in the tree.

"Say, Squire, call off yer dogs, for God's sake!" cried Firkin.

"So it's you, is it?" returned Andy. "You've bin workin' for Pincher Candle, hey? What did you try to run off with my mare for?"

"I didn't want the mare, so help me God! All I wanted was to get away from that old man—in a hurry. If you knew 'im like I do you'd understand."

"I know him, don't you fret. He's my grandfather. I run away from him myself two years ago. But I wasn't a full-grown man then. Was he after you with an ax?"

"With a gun! An' me workin' my head off for 'im ever since the last time I see you and yer blue hound here. And what for? All because I asked him for my wages."

"You were a fool to hire out with him. Couldn't you see what he was in his face? I guess you might's well come down. The dogs won't touch you. Leave 'im be, Galloper. Never mind 'im, Trap."

Firkin descended, looking anxiously over a shoulder at the dogs as he did so. He reached the ground in safety.

"Where's your pack?" asked Andy.

"I come away in such a hurry I left it behind, Squire. Well, Squire, much obliged."

"You dropped something. Your pocket must of busted."

Firkin's glance followed that of young Andy. There on the moss of the forest floor at his feet lay paper money, green and yellow and bluish and reddish, some crumpled and some folded and some flat. A tremor went through him.

"Looks like you collected your wages all right," said Andy, in a new voice.

At that, Firkin's right hand went to his hip, quick as thought; and as he pulled the short pistol he jumped backward. It was then that Galloper jumped and the automatic exploded once. Andy's jump was only a split second slower than the blue hound's—but it was crooked, and he ended in a heap on the ground.

"THAT was my busy day," said Sam Noddy. "Nothin' to equal it was ever saw before on Candle Creek. When I got home with the mare the queer feller rode off with, Jenny tells me to go acrost an' find out what the trouble might be at Pincher Candle's. I went over, lookin' to find the old hellyun rampin' round with a gun—but no, he's settin' in an arm-chair in his bed-room, dead as a mutton. He's gagged an' tied an' stone cold. And three or four boards is ripped out of the floor. When Jenny hears it she tells me to beat it down the road an' look for Andy Candle an' the dogs, an' she'll start Bruce McKim or somebody for Doc Baxter. I don't go far before I meet Trap, that there big red setter; an' she fetches me into the woods where young Andy Candle's layin' on the moss with the other two dogs lickin' his face. Andy's all over blood, an' swooned away—but cold water fetches him round. He's got a bullet-hole in his neck. And there a little piece off lays the peddler. Say, he's a mess. He's chawed half to death, and he's scared half to death—but he's alive. His pistol's layin' right there—but his hands is that ripped an' raw he can't use it—either that or its jambed somehow. Yes, that was my busy day. Yes, the two of them recovered—but that didn't do Firkin much good, for they jailed him for the rest of his life. They'd ought to hang him, but the lawyers proved as how he didn't exactly murder Pincher, but the old man went an' died of heart-failure. But he'd of murdered Andy too but for Andy's big blue hound. Yes, it was me bred that dog an' give him to Andy. He's a mystery, but he's a hero. Pincher didn't make a will, after all—the old liar! He didn't even go to Millville like he said he did. I guess he was that mean he hoped nobody would ever get anything that was his. But Andy got it all. He's farmin' the old place right now. No, he ain't rich. He went and give all that money Firkin robbed off old Pincher to the Sassiety for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—all of it only ten dollars he spent on a collar for his blue hound, Galloper. That's Andy Candle for you. Can you beat it?"

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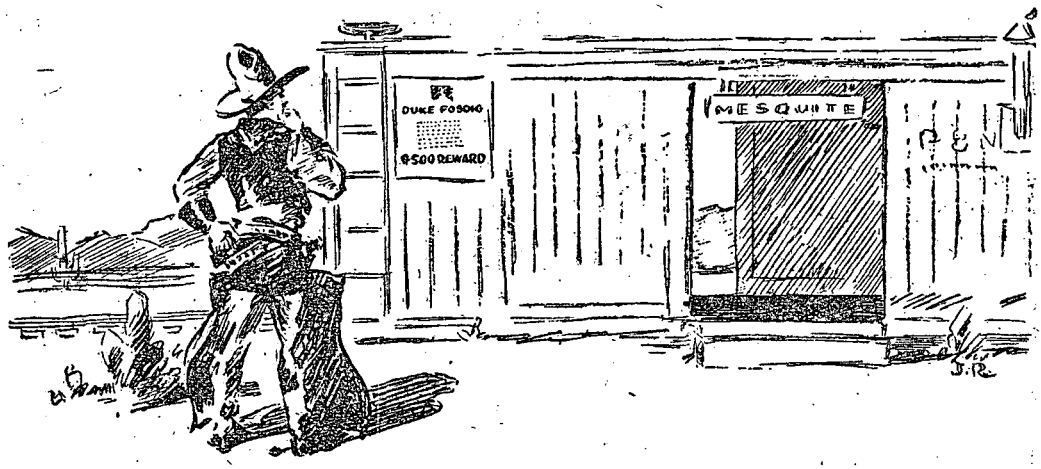

CASH AND CARRY

By HARRISON G. STREETER

Author of "The Acid Test," etc.

LUKE LARSON OF THE BAR L BELIEVED IN BEING HIS OWN BANK AND PERAMBULATING SAFETY DEPOSIT BOX. WHEN NEWS GOT ABOUT THAT DUKE FOSDIG, A MUCH WANTED MAN FOR ROBBERY, RUSTLING AND A FEW CRIMES OF THAT SORT, WAS AROUND, SEVERAL PEOPLE THOUGHT LUKE A GOOD PERSON TO KEEP AN EYE ON

THE train on the Texas Midland slowed to a stop at the little station of Mesquite. Luke Larson climbed down the steps and looked about. He was just back from Chicago where he had delivered a large shipment of stock. His ranch, the Bar L, was sixty miles north across the rugged ridges of the Alta Verdes. Tight packed in a money belt hidden under his shirt was twenty thousand dollars in bills of large denomination. Luke did not believe in checks. He had a weakness for the feel of the long green or the clink of gold coin. His peculiarity was well known on the range. He was afraid of nothing, but on the present occasion caution had spoken. So instead of continuing on to Rawhide, ten miles nearer his destination, he had stopped at Mesquite intending to borrow a horse from the Lazy Y and pass through the Alta Verdes before his presence was known to any potential road agents in the region. He paused before the dismounted box car which served as a station. A placard had drawn his attention.

"Duke Fosdig, dead or alive, is wanted for murder, cattle rustling and bank robbery. He, with a small gang, is now believed to be somewhere in or about the Alta Verdes.

"$500 Reward
Sheriff Taggart,
Dos Altos County."

Unconsciously his hand sought the butt of his gun and he frowned hesitatingly. Then his streak of obstinacy asserted itself and he strode purposefully down the dusty road to the Lazy Y only a mile distant. Jim Gordon, the rancher, sought to discourage him from crossing the Alta Verdes alone under the circumstances, but the only modification in his plans that he was able to make was to add a rifle to the equipment he loaned him for the journey.

"What sorta lookin' feller is this Duke Fosdig?" inquired Luke as he prepared to depart.

"Clean shaven, blue eyes, and with a face that'll make yuh set up an' take notice," returned Jim. "He's one of the most compellin' cusses you ever did see, an' chain lightnin' with the six-gun. You'd better stop over till he slopes along to some other range."

"Thanks, Jim, but I got to be gettin'

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back. Lots to be done up on the Bar L." And he rode off into the foothills.

He did not know that his expected return with the money was known to any but himself. But he was still miles from the Alta Verdes when a swarthy featured horseman, following an obscure trail several miles to the east, passed him and rode desperately toward the mountains.

THE Texas Midland train had barely left the station at Rawhide, where Luke had originally intended to stop, when a rider hastily left that town also and rode north toward the Alta Verdes. He was clean shaven, with blue eyes and a bronzed face that fairly radiated with set purpose.

Entirely unconscious of the stir he was causing on the part of some of the transient population of the Alta Verdes, Luke Larson urged his horse up the steep, rocky trail. Sundown found him buried deep in the heart of the mountains. He was seeking a favorable camping place—secluded and easily defended in case of need, for he must spend one night on the trail. He was not unduly alarmed, but cautious, for the chaperoning of $20,000 through a lawless country was not a child's pastime.

In the rocky end of a blind gulch he built his tiny fire, beside a bubbling spring. He fed his horse oats from a nose bag which he had brought along, and tied him to a stunted pine in the shelter of an overhanging rock. Then he ate his own lunch, previously prepared, filled and lit his pipe, and settled down comfortably to enjoy the hour of twilight.

LIFE in the open had been his regular practice for years. But he never tired of the marvelous southwestern sunsets. They carried him away from his cares and built castles of rosy promise for him in the brilliantly tinted clouds. This occasion was no exception to the rule. Duke Fosdig, the money he was carrying, and the Bar L drifted far off in the dim margin of his thoughts. His rifle lay beside a rock several feet away and his holster was jammed against the stone upon which he leaned. His wrapt gaze followed the kaleidoscopic changes in the western sky.

A slight rustle behind him sent a shock through his system. With marvelous control, he stilled the thrill that coursed through his tingling muscles, shifted his position casually and swept an unhurried glance over his shoulder. At the same time his exploring fingers touched his holster and found it jammed tightly against the rock.

What he saw sent another wave of thrills coursing through his system. Behind him, not ten feet away, stood a man. At his side leaned a rifle. His thumb was hooked in his belt. Directly under it, the black butt of a forty-five stood well out an open topped holster. He was clean shaven with blue eyes and a face both grim and purposeful.

"Howdy," greeted Luke steadying his voice with an effort. "You're sorta sudden."

"Sorta," grinned the stranger. "You camped right in my front yard. I was takin' a little siesta back of that rock."

Silence descended. It was a game of wits, a cold deck and the stranger's deal. Too often Luke Larson had heard of the lightning quickness of Duke Fosdig with the six-gun. Life was sweet and suicide undesirable. He counted the twenty thousand already lost, but hoped to see the Bar L again and more wonderful sunsets.

"I was waitin' for somebody an' fell asleep," finally spoke the stranger. "He'll be ridin' a Bar L hawss an' have twenty thousand dollars in his pocket. Now you're plum' disappointin'. Yours is a Lazy Y cayuse an' I don't reckon you got any twenty thousand in *your* pocket."

"Nope," returned Luke forcing a grin. Well, it wasn't in his pocket anyhow. It was in his money belt and a lie to a road agent didn't count at any time.

"Ain't that too danged bad," drawled the other. "Now I'll hafta do it over again. I'll just camp right here with yuh though till mornin' if yuh don't mind."

THE situation was filled with exciting possibilities but Larson had no choice. He felt he was being played with, but there were guns behind and no telling how many out in front. Internally he cursed himself for a fool and slouched out easily on the

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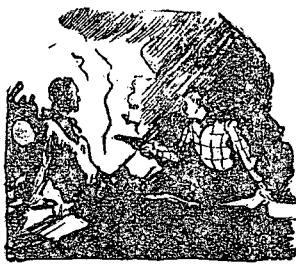
rock. His acting was good. After a time he appeared to doze off.

Hours passed. The fire died down to shifting ashes. At times Luke eased his cramped muscles but did not look back of him. A slight rustle in the dark shadow of the rock each time he grew uneasy told him that the stranger was alert.



Dawn was just paling the east when a slight sound out along the edge of the gulch below drew him up with a start.

"We're gettin' callers an' I got a hunch they ain't friendly," came a tense whisper out of the shadows. "Get yore gun an' don't forget to shoot. Don't look back, I'll take care of this side."

Luke thought of the reward notice at Mesquite. No doubt it was Sheriff Taggart looking for the outlaws. That was a pickle for Luke Larson to be in. He thought swiftly.

Suddenly he swung up his gun and shot wildly. Then he ducked behind a rock and glanced back. The stranger was nowhere to be seen, but in a moment his gun spoke from directly above.

"Hey, Sheriff!" yelled Luke, "here he is right under you." Then he hugged the rock expecting any moment to feel the tremendous impact of a heavy lead slug.

Shots came—a lively fusillade, but none struck him. He was mildly surprised. Then the firing ceased. Scrambling hoofs told him that their assailants had departed. The light had strengthened.

"Well, stranger," drawled a cool voice back of him," we got one of 'em. I seen 'im layin' across a saddle when they rode off."

LUKE gulped. Possibly they had shot one of the posse—or the sheriff himself. That would be worse than awkward.

"But yuh made a mistake," continued the voice. "I heard yuh callin' me 'Sheriff' when yuh seen 'em comin'. Well, that's plum' wrong. I ain't the sheriff at all. Now yuh catch up yore hawss an slope while the goin's good. They ain't likely to stop fer a while now they're started. I'm stayin' right here for a spell."

Wonderingly, Luke obeyed, expecting any instant to be shot down by the cool man behind the rock. His air of nonchalance covered a seething interior.

But nothing happened. He rode hastily up the trail. After ten miles, he stopped and heaved a tremendous sigh, built himself a smoke and glanced furitively about.

"Well, I'll be blowed," he grunted.

TEN miles further on he rounded a point of rocks. Suddenly a group of armed horsemen stood before him. He yanked out his gun. Then he recognized Sheriff Taggart.

"Put that up, yuh danged fool," growled the officer. "Had one man shot already this mornin' in a brush with Duke Fosdig's gang an' that's enough fer now."

The sheriff rolled and lit a cigarette.

"They got clean away, too," he growled blowing a cloud of smoke into the still morning air. "Reckon yuh ain't seen nawthin' of 'em have yuh?"

Luke was silent. The situation was too complicated for discussion.

"Ain't very talkative this mornin'," are yuh?" growled the sheriff. "Well then, mosey right along. We'll be ridin' up to Red Notch Pass. Mabby-so we c'n head off them varmints yet."

Luke rode on. He wanted time to think it out before he faced the sheriff with the facts. His mind wasn't working well this morning anyhow. It was somewhat after this manner that he quieted his troublesome conscience as he rode rapidly upward toward the deep notch in the Alta Verdes. His longing for the Bar L had increased amazingly.

Again he was surprised. An hour later he rounded a rocky point in the narrow trail and found himself face to face with a man behind a pointed gun. Blue eyes gleamed menacingly above a red handkerchief tied over the remainder of his features.

"Stick 'em up, yuh!"

Luke's hands jerked in front of him. A crash of brush and the sound of plunging hoofs came from directly above. The ban-

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dit's horse started suddenly, swerving the gun in the masked man's hand.

LUKE'S hand dived swiftly. Two reports blended into one.

The outlaw slid from his saddle and the breath went out of Larson's body. He grasped the pommel, clung limply to his seat while the mountains ran around before his eyes. More crashing of bushes and shots came to him dimly.

When he had steadied slightly a man stood at his side helping him to dismount.

It was Sheriff Taggart. A half dozen members of his posse herded a little group of prisoners in the back-ground. Beside the sheriff stood a man with blue eyes and a clean shaven face. He was smiling grimly while he shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers of his revolver.

"Get him, Sheriff," gasped Luke breathlessly. "He's Duke Fosdig."

"Him!" growled Taggart. "Say, feller, you're dreamin'. That's Sergeant Steve Brent of the Texas Rangers."

"That's Duke Fosdig layin' there." He ripped the covering from the face of the fallen outlaw. A pair of blue eyes set in a smooth shaven face opened slowly and stared.

"Get up, Duke," commanded the sheriff. "Yu'll live to be hanged yet. Yuh lost yore knack. Thought you was goin' to get this feller an' his twenty thousand when he comes through the Alta Verdes."

"We jumped 'im in a gulch this mornin' twenty miles back," growled Duke, "but he yelled fer you an we knew yuh must be snoopin' somewhere around so we beat it. That w[illegible] we met up with yuh in Pine C[illegible]

A HALF hour later Luke approached the ranger.

"Say," he queried, "what made you act so all-fired strange down in the gulch last night."

Sergeant Brent smiled. "Sheriff Taggart told me about the queer way you had of carrying big sums of money around with you," he explained. "Thought you needed a lesson, so I started out to give you one before Duke Fosdig had a chance."

"Huh," grunted Luke. "You win."

"But what I'm wondering about," continued Brent, "is where Duke's shot hit you. Saw you pantin' like a roped calf when we came along but you seem to be all right now."

Luke gasped in surprise. "Gosh, I'd forgot all about that in the excitement," he exclaimed.

Exploring fingers soon found a neat hole drilled through the center of his leather belt and beneath it was a great wad. Ripping open his shirt he tore loose the money belt from about him. In its front was a round hole. He drew forth a roll of hundred dollar bills and in its center was a forty-five caliber bullet.

"Huh," snorted Taggart. "I've heard of a lot of different ways of handlin' money but that's a new use fer wealth, I'd say."

EAGLE FEATHERS

IN THE olden days, twelve feathers from the crown of a full-grown eagle would buy a good pony among the Indians. These birds were much sought after in all tribes, and their feathers were used to ornament various articles, as well as to make head-dresses and war-bonnets. It used to be very difficult to buy an eagle feather head-dress from an Indian, and a fine article frequently brought as much as $200. The white feather of the eagle's tail was worn attached to the manes and tails of the war ponies. When returning from the warpath, the warriors attached black feathers to the eagle feathers, and when riding through the village one had but to count the black feathers to know how many scalps had been taken by the rider. The feather worn by Indians in their scalp lock was usually very long and symmetrical.—E. A. B.

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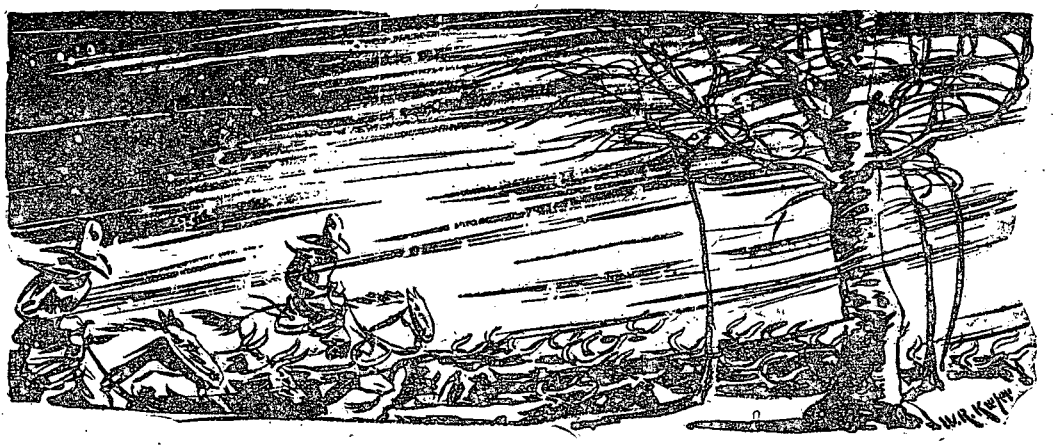

BOSS OF THE V7

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Smoky Basin," "Bunch Grass Butchers," etc.

WHEN THE TENDERFOOT SON OF THE OWNER COMES TO THE RANCH PREPARED TO SHOW THE OLD WADDIES HOW THE OUTFIT OUGHT TO BE RUN—WELL THAT SORT OF SITUATION IS BOUND TO START SOMETHING. IT STARTED SOMETHING ON THE V7 THAT BIG GEORGE AND THE BLIZZARD FINISHED

IT was December eighth and Big George McArthur, foreman for the V7 Cattle Company, had come to Pivot to celebrate. That morning he had given half a dozen waddies their checks, issued by Kent Rivers, manager for that same company; had stated regretfully that with the fall work finished and practically all of the V7's six thousand dogies on winter feed, they couldn't use the punchers any longer.

At about the same time every year for the last ten, he had done this, always a little apologetically, always regretful at parting with these hands who of necessity could not be permanent. He'd see 'em next year, 'long about September first, when the roundin'-up'd begin. The boys had expected to be turned off when the snow flew, and this particular bunch, like every other bunch Big George could remember in his years as range foreman, had invited him to come along with 'em to town and help 'em paint it red.

Big George was nothing loath. This annual spree had become a tradition, an occurrence both expected and tolerated by manager Kent Rivers. It was Big George's vacation. He'd get gloriously drunk and raise all kinds of hob in Pivot. The saloon men and gamblers would get most of his summer's wages, and quite possibly Kent would have to bail him out of the cooler, for Big George, an old-time cow-puncher, ran true to form.

And this frosty evening, when the breath of tied horses froze on their bodies, and smoke-like fog issued from overcoated men's nostrils as they clumped down the plank sidewalks of Pivot, seeking places of shelter and warmth, Big George and his coterie were whooping it up in the Elkhorn Saloon. They'd stripped the fat groceryman, Ted Bowers, to the waist; and perched on the bar, very drunk, he was being painted to resemble Chief Wolf Fang of the Utes. Big George was applying the paint when Bowers, seeing himself in the mirror, gave a yell of sheer terror.

This yell halted young Valentine Edmonds as, in a very bad humor for such a good-looking young man, he was passing the Elkhorn Saloon in search of a hotel. Setting down his suitcase, he peered through the grimy window. He couldn't see much, for there were swinging doors between him and the celebrators, but he heard enough to disgust him thoroughly.

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Bert Chase, oblivious to everything about him, was singing every unprintable verse of "The Chisholm Trail" which he knew, and he knew a great many. Val had never punched cows, in fact had never been on a ranch, and the alcoholic exuberance of these cowboys struck a false note with him.

But then he was tired and cold and cross from a long uncomfortable ride in the single day coach of the jerk-water railroad which, joining a main line at Dawson, Wyoming, connected Pivot County, a mountain-ringed empire high among the Rockies, with the outside world. The accommodations on that train and its snail-like progress had combined to make the journey the most wretched Val had ever experienced. However, this wasn't all that disgruntled young Val Edmonds.

Old R. G. Edmonds, his father and the president of the V7 Cattle Company, had said, "Young fellow, you've loafed and played long enough. Go to the V7 ranch and learn the business. I'll have Kent Rivers meet you at Pivot."

Val was nothing loath to learn the business, for he had some preconceived notions about it that he wished to try out; in particular he had some rather radical notions concerning the hired help problem, and here he was. But neither Kent Rivers nor any emissary from the V7 had met him at the depot, a consideration most certainly due the son of the man whom people mentioned in awed and respectful tones as "Old R. G." If acquainted with him, they boasted about it, for Edmonds senior was a great man in the cow world.

He made his headquarters in Denver, and Pivot County ranchers wishing loans sought him. Mighty was his influence with more than one bank. Raisers of hay, not fortunate enough to own stock, almost reverenced R. G. He'd buy their hay this year as he'd done last, and pay as liberally as conditions warranted. Once again the hay producer would be able to meet his grocery bill and his taxes and buy shoes and mittens for the kiddies—the kiddies that when they got big enough hoped to punch cows for old R. G.

And now, as Val hesitated at the window of the Elkhorn Saloon, a man muffled in a sheepskin coat passed.

"Goin' some, ain't they?" the citizen observed conversationally. "Marshal hunted his hole quick as he seen old Big George ridin' into town."

"Why?" asked Val practically, rubbing his numb ears.

"'Cause if he was visible, some people might want him to put that bunch in the jug, an' he knows he might meet with a lotta hard luck a-doin' it. Colder'n hell, ain't it? Yuh need one o' these big, old Scotch caps like mine."

"Who's the bunch and who's Big George?" inquired Val.

"The bunch," observed the communicative citizen, "started out with jus' V7 punchers, but it's a sorta mixed outfit now, other waddies an' some town fellers an' some plain moochers getting a free jag. Big George? Oh, he's range boss for the V7, Old R. G.'s outfit, yuh know. Well, so-long."

Into the brown eyes of young Val Edmonds came a determined gleam. V7 punchers, were they? And Big George, the range foreman? He'd been mentioned at R. G.'s office in Denver as a very competent man, which this did not bear out. A foreman on a rip-roaring drunk with a lot of roughs must be both incompetent and irresponsible. As R. G.'s son, Val would naturally have a lot to say about the management of the ranch from now on. He'd investigate this orgy, and Kent Rivers would hear about it later.

Ribald laughter mingled with ribald song came from the saloon as Val Edmonds entered with his neat alligator bag. The paint-bedaubed Ted Bowers was attempting to dance a jig, and the man whom Val instinctively felt must be Big George bent forward, clapping his hands in accompaniment.

Big George's battered and faded white Stetson, with four creases converging to a single point at the apex of its crown, was pushed far back, revealing a high fore-

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head and bald dome. His eyes were deep-seated and puckered around their edges. So weather-beaten was his le n face that it might have been cast fro bronze. A heavy, brown, drooping mu e concealed his upper lip and n of his mouth, but the chin under it w firm and strong. A soiled red sweater at sagged generously at the neck covered wide shoulders. Below bleached overalls, supported by a whang-leather string belt, long slender legs met wrinkled boots with heels curled inwards till the man seemed pigeon-toed. He wore neither spurs nor six-shooter.

Seeing Val Edmonds in his long, gray plaid overcoat, soft fedora above it and pointed laced shoes below, Big George straightened to his full height and Val knew why he was called "Big"—the man stood head and shoulders above all others in the Elkhorn. And he vociferated in a voice which matched his frame.

"My lord, boys, has I reached the seein' things stage a'ready? Uh-unh, can't be. But tell me, is that 'ere pilgrim real?"

He advanced to Val, a tall youth himself, and, looking gravely down at him, pinched his cheek.

"Lookit the little jiggie like a gal's eyebrow under his purty smeller, fellas," he continued. "Here's whar we gets a runnin' mate for ol' Wolf Fang. Uch-oo!"

Val Edmonds had resented the pinch, and Big George's exclamation resulted from the smack his own cheeks received from Edmonds' hand.

"He's real, sure 'nough," chuckled Big George, "an' a spunky li'l' greenhorn to boot."

The fun began before he'd ceased speaking, and for three minutes thereafter the Elkhorn was filled with men scurrying this way and that to avoid two men tangled together and tussling like bulldogs. Two card tables were wrecked, seven chairs overturned, and three men, too intoxicated to avoid the contestants, were trampled underfoot. But at the end of the scuffle Val Edmonds, minus overcoat, hat, collar and tie, was perched precariously on the bar, with Big George holding him there with one hand.

"We's right hospitable folks," he observed. "And we aims to welcome even a pilgrim like yuh all proper an' peaceful-like, but yuh shouldn't ought to start somethin' yuh can't finish."

II

MID-AFTERNOON of the next day found Val Edmonds seated beside Kent Rivers in a small sled with a spanking team of blacks conveying them out across a great, snow-covered, sage-brush flat toward mountains on the west—mountains whose hoary crests were silhouetted against the deep blue horizon. Purplish blue, fading to light green, was the pine timber on their great slopes, with all the landscape white between. The air was crystal clear with a sting of cold that pricked Val's face like needles.

"Smeared you all over with paint and made you do an Indian war-dance, eh? But they never did find out who you were?" chuckled Kent, pursuing the discussion of Val's adventure of the previous evening. He was a stocky man with a very red face, close-clipped black mustache and slightly hooked nose, which was practically all that could be seen of him, for the great collar of his wolfskin coat was turned up over his cap, and his hands were encased in gauntlet mittens.

"No!" decisively stated Val. "At least I stand on my own legs when I get in a mix, and don't drag in dad's name to protect me. Didn't tell 'em who I was at the hotel, either, after those yahoos let me go there."

Kent peered upward at Val Edmonds' face. "Good for you," he commented. "That's the right spirit." As Val made no comment, the manager continued, "As I said before, I'm sorry I didn't get in to meet you, but I was at the Spindle Ranch and only got the letter when I reached home about ten last night. Twenty miles from the Spindle to the home ranch, you know, and this snow didn't help the travelling any for a saddle-horse."

Val looked at the manager. "Then there is more than one ranch in the V7?"

Kent smiled. "Five, all big places and isolated from each other," he stated. "They're scattered for sixty miles along this west side from the north to the south end of the county. I knew Big George was

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going to town, and had to see about feeding the cattle at the Spindle."

Val squirmed in his seat. "You had to see about part of that bully's work?"

"Oh, I found he'd sorted the stock and left everything in tip-top shape before he went," Kent returned, but Val apparently didn't hear.

"That's exactly what I thought," he continued vehemently. "How could you expect anything else of an irresponsible, incompetent, bullying drunkard like him? You tried to smooth it over, and put me off neatly there in Pivot when I told you I would not have that confounded fellow work for the V7 a minute longer. Kent Rivers, I won't be put off like a kid."

"Sure it's not just a personal matter?" queried Kent. "I'm something of a philosopher, kid, and I do think a man ought to be big enough——"

Val Edmonds' face flamed as he cut in, "I'm not thinking of the personal side of it, though I was insulted and humiliated. Great Scott! I never was so humiliated in all my life. It's the principle of the thing! How can you defend such conduct?"

"Precedent, I guess. Cowboys, for as far back as I can remember, have considered dudes, tenderfeet, pilgrims, or whatever you choose to call the green Easterner, as fair sport."

"I'm no Easterner!"

"You looked it last night, and you're green. In the old days a warrior had to win his spurs before he became a knight. It's a good deal that way with these punchers: a pilgrim must win his spurs before he will be accepted. Your opinion of Big George is, pardon me, fallacious as hell. However, he doesn't know who you are, which gives you a tremendous advantage."

"Gives me an advantage? Exactly what do you mean?"

"You're here, Val Edmonds, to learn this business and to make good. Very well, the first step is to make good with the manpower that keeps the wheels of the business revolving. In this, as in any business, the biggest problem is the human element and the understanding of it."

Val stared wide-eyed at the man beside him, and his mouth opened in astonishment.

"You'd force me to take the defensive? Put me on trial?" he ejaculated. "Why the devil should I want to make good with that vulgar roughneck?"

"I was getting to the advantage being unknown gives you," returned Kent gravely. "If Big George had known who you were last night, he'd have had no sport with you. As the big boss's son you'd have been elevated above the common herd and protected from their pranks and gibes by your father's position. You couldn't have met Big George man to man, stood on your own feet, be weighed on your own merits. He might think many uncomplimentary things, but outwardly he would have been respectful and perhaps even deferential. Do you get my meaning?"

"Oh, yes, I see your point," Val answered testily. "But, great Scott, man, you're somehow managing to put an entirely different angle to this proposition. It's *he* that should make good with me! Not—"

"Certainly," Kent cut in. "There are two sides to this touchy problem. You fellows are as far apart as the poles, and what I want to do is get you together so that a reconciliation and mutual respect will result."

"Mutual respect nothing! I'll not change my opinion of the confounded fellow you're defending—for you are defending him."

Kent Rivers' eyes half closed and he gazed across the white expanse as though looking back into the years. Slowly but forcefully he answered.

"Defend Big George? Of course I do, and you'll understand why before you've stayed on this ranch one brief year. Mind, I don't defend drinking. It's a weakness of many cowhands, but seldom a vice. I think their periodic sprees are an outlet for the cussedness bottled up inside every human being. They're a let-down after—Val Edmonds, you know nothing of what cow-punchers do or go through.

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"Take the work of this fall alone: About September first began the rounding-up and the branding, dehorning, vaccinating, shipping, and sorting and shifting of the cattle for the winter feeding. Ninety days have those boys been following the chuck-wagon with never a Sunday or holiday, never a pause or break, through storm or shine, in their fourteen-hour days, which is often accompanied by night herding. And Big George was running the outfit. You say he's irresponsible. Boy, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Shucks, anybody can drive cattle," remarked Val. "Just sit on a horse all day. No work about that. I've ridden a good deal and never found it very hard. As times change and things progress, these old-time cowboys with their vile habits must give place to younger and better men. Big George must go."

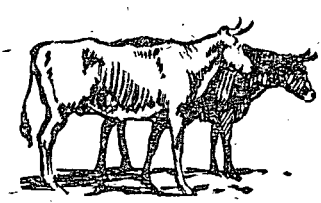
"How'd you feel about it yourself if you'd served an outfit loyally and given them everything you had for ten years?" Kent inquired patiently.

"Loyally my foot! Like the others, he works for the money in it, at the only thing he knows how to do, and does just as little as possible in order to get by."

"Kid, you've got some notions that simply must be knocked into a cocked hat. I'm figuring out a little scheme to make things right between you and the range foreman and to bring you to your senses."

"I'm off on the wrong foot, am I? Well, I'm from Missouri. Show me. What's the scheme? If it will get rid of that big bully, I'll consider it."

"I'm not letting you in on the scheme, however. Tomorrow I want you to ride to the Spindle Ranch, but you're not to tell anybody there who you are. You can be Bob, or Bill, or John, that I've hired in town, see? I'll give you a note to Big George, telling him I've sent you to help him move the two-year-old steers we're feeding for the January Stock Show up to the home ranch. That's all."



"Why, he won't be there. He's in Pivot, drunk. And I don't see——"

"Yes, he will. That periodic spree lasts only a couple of days and Big George'll reach the Spindle sometime tomorrow evening, ready to go to work again."

"And I'm to keep mum about who I am and help him drive those steers to the home ranch, a one-day trip, eh?—Well, I hate to associate with the uncouth yahoo for even a day, but I will, just to see your scheme through and for the very great satisfaction of handing him his check when we get home that evening. I want you to make out that check and give it to me so I'll have it all ready."

"I'll do that," said Kent, "if you'll promise me you won't take advantage of having the check and hand it to George when you first see him. You're not to give it to him until the steers are safe in the feed lot at the home ranch."

"Fair enough," returned Val with a triumphant smile. "This must be the home ranch right ahead in this creek valley, eh?"

"It is. The Spindle lies away to the south, and there are lots of creeks to cross and no road to speak of between the two."

III

AT NINE-THIRTY on the following evening, Big George McArthur stabled his frosty horse at the Spindle Ranch and went to the kitchen of the main house, where a light still burned.

"'Lo, Matt," he said to a hairy individual whose feet rested on a stick of stove wood which in turn rested on the open oven door. "Little fine frost fallin'. Sure sign somethin's goin' to bust loose." George removed his hat and skull-cap and with thumb and forefinger began working loose the icicles which dangled from his mustache.

"Back, huh?" grunted Matt. "Come through with some snake medicine."

"Got nary drop, Matt. I does all my drinkin' in town. Yuh should 'a' been there. It was one lully-coola of a party. Pilgrim from some place come bustin' in on us an' we made one fine-lookin' Pi-ute Brave outa him, though we never could get him full. He didn't cotton to it at all—them greenhorns make me sick."

Matt grinned. "Does they?" he chuckled.

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"Well, yuh'll be plum' bed-rid' tomorrer. I don't see what got into Kent Rivers. What's he done but hire a goofy-lookin' jasper as don't know sic'-'em, and send him down here for to help you take the show steers up to the home ranch. Here's the note he brung, so it's straight goods all right. Gawd pity you, George."

"Huh?" Big George scanned the note. "Rivers says I ain't to rope in nobody else tuh help, but jes' to make out with this punkin. Thunder, ol' Kent musta been drunk hisself. That's the dirtiest deal he's ever handed me, an' I thunk he was plum' white."

"I put the lunker in the bunkhouse, course," resumed Matt. "Had tuh build a fire for him, too. Reckon he's used to one o' them steam-heatin' jiggies they has in cities. He sure turned up his nose when he seen them bunks and the blankets the rest of 'em had but he was tired enough so he flopped pronto."

"An' he'll crawl out 'bout four a. m.," said Big George. "Doggone his picture, if Kent Rivers sends such a walloper to help me I'll do my darn'dest tuh make him do a day's work. Goo' night."

And Big George, his curly-heeled boots now encased in four-buckle overshoes, went at his ungainly rolling walk to the bunkhouse.

IV

VAL EDMONDS awoke with a start. Somebody was clamping his shoulder painfully and a rough voice was saying, "Hey, shake a leg! Come alive! Roll out!"

He blinked. Where was he? The rough walls of a log cabin were dimly lighted by a small kerosene lamp, a roaring fire was going in a box stove, the wind was whistling outside, and a huge man was bending over him.

"Wal, by seven horned tree-toads!" exclaimed that man. "Yuh an' me's met afore. Hullo, greenie. 'Id yuh get the war-paint washed off yuh all jake?"

"No thanks to you if I did," replied the youth coldly. "And what are you making all the noise about now? Up to some more deviltry? It isn't light yet."

"Never mind 'bout that. Come out of it. Get up to the house an' get some Java boilin' an' some hot cakes mixed up. I happens to be your boss today."

Val threw back the covers. "Admitted," he said, cryptically. "So bulldoze me all you please while you have a chance. You'll not have the advantage of being my boss tomorrow."

"Probably not. Most jaspers like you get a bellyful in one day. Lackin' guts, they don't stick, which suits me jus' as well. Can yuh cook, Willie?"

"My name's not Willie, and I'm not supposed to cook, either."

"Ho, ain't yuh? Kent Rivers tell yuh jus' exactly what yuh was to do? Uh-unh.

He told yuh to help me. Wal, day's work's begun; an' as yuh can't cook, take that lantern and get out to the barn. Clean it out, water and feed all the hosses. Yuh might harness Matt's team for him, too. I'll have flapjacks an' Java ready by that time. 'Nother thing, Willie, don't get huffy, or you an' me ain't goin' tuh get along at all. I wouldn't talk to yuh thisaway if it wasn't that yuh was plain askin' for it."

BUT Val Edmonds wasn't squelched. "I might have known a bully like you would hand me a dirty deal," he chortled. "Why, it's only a quarter after four and you're ordering me to do——"

"I'm outa bed, too," Big George broke in. "An' I ain't askin' yuh to do any more'n I do."

Angry though Val was, the shot told and he completed his dressing in silence. Big George opened the door and admitted a swirl of wind-driven snow. Val's eyes opened wide and he started to say something, but the door had closed and George had gone. The kid drew a slip of blue paper from his vest pocket and looked at it.

"By George," he said, "I came very near to handing the fellow this. If I hadn't promised Kent Rivers, I certainly would have. Getting me out at four o'clock in the morning! Telling me to clean a barn!"

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He broke off suddenly and frowned. "Still, Big George was up first and built a fire, and he's getting breakfast."

A breakfast of bacon and eggs, hot cakes and coffee Val found amazingly good, for he was hungry, his usually lethargic morning appetite being whetted by the work he had done at the stable.

"You aren't going to start anywhere with cattle in this storm, are you?" he asked as Big George washed the dishes and Matt wiped them.

"Yuh dunno ol' Big George or yuh wouldn't ask," Matt chuckled. "Wind's kinda died down, but I s'pect it's only a lull. I'll have hell a-gettin' out the hay today; but as you're takin' two hundred head away, that'll help me out consid'able."

"Loan Willie that old pair of chaps, will yuh, Matt?" requested Big George. "Got a heavy coat, overshoes, mitts, sweater an' cap, ain't yuh?"

"Yes, but I don't want to be bundled up so I can't move." Rivers had provided R. G.'s son with serviceable, warm clothes.

"Better that way than froze stiff. Pull another pair of britches on over the top of them yuh got."

"No. The chaps will be bunglesome enough."

Big George handed Val a pair of discarded overalls. "Put 'em on," he ordered, and Val resentfully obeyed. "How'd you get out to the home ranch" Big George continued. "I was there jus' a few days ago and yuh wasn't there then."

Val hesitated. The foreman plainly knew nothing of Kent Rivers having come to Pivot. And before they left in the morning they'd seen nothing of Big George or his companions of the hilarious evening. Rivers had said, "They're bedded down some place. Don't think we'll look for them."

HOWEVER, the young fellow was spared the necessity of answering, for Big George, lantern in hand, was on his way to the stable. It was pitchy dark and Val, as he saddled his horse, voiced another protest.

"You're going to start out in this darkness?"

"Be light right soon. Fortunately steers is in a feed lot, but we gotta go up the field a ways and hunt up a yearlin' to throw in with 'em."

"Why?"

"'Cause them show steers is too heavy to handle easy at the end of a rope, and I don't want to abuse one of 'em, anyhow. Got a heap of icy creeks to cross," Big George added, as though that fully explained the need of a yearling.

Val was mystified and was still resentful over being routed out so early.

"I can't see why you want to get out and chase cattle in the dark," he said. "We've only twenty miles to go, and I rode it in four hours quite easily yesterday."

"But yuh wasn't drivin' dogies," replied the foreman patiently. "Twenty miles is a long drive for fat steers that you gotta handle something like they was eggs. And yuh never can tell what may set us back an hour or two. Besides, it gets dark about four these days and we've got about a mile of willows to go through there at the home ranch afore we reach the feed lot. Then willows'll be full of cattle, too, and if we hit into 'em after dark there'll be one heck of a mix-up."

"You mean our herd would mix with those in the willows? How could they while we were driving them?"

"Yuh're catchin' on right fast." Big George's tone was sarcastic. "In them willows in the dark we'd have as much chance of keepin' our drive all together and from mixin' with the other cattle as a cottontail'd have o' lickin' a gray wolf."

"What difference if they did mix?"

"Fust place, we'd fail to land our drive, somethin' cowboys ain't never excusable for not doin' no time under no conditions; second place, we'd have to roundup 'bout a thousand cattle next day an' cut our bunch out o' them. 'Sides that, these show steers would go without feed tonight, which'd be very bad for 'em. Le's go."

AND Val followed the old puncher out into the stinging air, riding up a snow-covered meadows in darkness that seemed to close about them, ominous with the threat of low storm clouds, although it was not snowing at the moment.

Big George seemed able to see in the

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dark. At any rate, a mile above the buildings at the edge of a great willow patch, he quite soon singled out a small horned animal from among the bedded cattle there, and started it. The animal dodged this way and that, but Big George took after it on the run, thus giving it no chance to turn back, and Val would have lost both of them if his horse had not followed of its own accord.

Ten minutes later the two hundred steers in the feed lot were being driven through the gate, and Big George paused near Val long enough to say, "You foller up the tail end of 'em, and don't run 'em, but don't let 'em scatter or get away. Keep 'em walkin'. I gotta get on the point."

He crowded through the gate and disappeared from Val's sight. Day was faintly beginning to dawn and the white-faced rollicky cattle moved ghost-like in a gray mist, their freezing breath forming a light cloud above them.

"Only a little after six," said Val. "Why, we'll eat dinner at the home ranch. The way these steers are frolicking along, that old scalawag can't tell me we'll be all day."

An hour later, however, he was beating his hands to keep them warm and wondering where he was and if the sun would never get on the job. Then sun had risen, but he had no idea in which direction it was, because of the overcast sky. In fact, so heavy were the clouds that the cattle moved forward in a little world of their own, surrounded by cloud horizons. A fine frost fell, though not a breath of wind stirred. Val could see no sign of road, and the animals kicked away the snow from scrubby sagebrush.

He loped up to Big George at the point and shouted, "We're going in the wrong direction!"

"Nope, don't reckon we are," was the answer. "We're crossin' Bush Flats and here's Bush Creek right ahead."

"But I know we're headed wrong. Going south right now."

"Yuh're lost, feller, which ain't to be wondered at none."

BIG George rode ahead to the creek, wide and shallow at this point and covered by a thin, smooth sheet of ice which gave way, cracking beneath his horse's feet. Spurring the reluctant pony forward, George reached the opposite bank, then turned and came back. Six or more feet of glaring ice now fringed each bank of the stream, with an open sheet of water between.

"Wish we had some sand," grunted the foreman. "It's things like this as makes a cow-puncher cuss an' fight his head."

"Why?" snorted Val, who saw nothing troublesome or dangerous about a stream where there was not over a foot and a half of water. So Big George was positive they were going right, was he? Well, no telling where the journey would end, and Big George would be obliged to admit his error and would show himself as incompetent.

The two men crowded the steers to the creek bank, where not one of them would set foot on the ice or lead out across the stream. George was here, there, everywhere at once, whooping, lashing with his rope, jamming the creatures into a compact mass, forcing them at the stream. It was useless. Those at the bank crowded back those behind crowded forward. They met and seethed about like maggots. Val, shouting and waving his arms, felt helpless and impotent. His horse knew a great deal more about this business than he did. Unguided, the pony dodged this way and that, heading off steers that tried to break away, nipping them as he sent them back into the herd. Val thought of "dumb driven cattle" and for the first time appreciated the words.

"Hold 'em close as yuh can, kid!" rang Big George's voice. "And crowd 'em right atter me. Steady. Don't get 'em too riled."

WITH his rope in his mittened hands the old cow-puncher rode into the herd, slowly worming his way through it. Val saw him single out the horned yearling he'd been at such pains to get that

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morning, He flipped his loop over the animal's horns and snubbed it to his saddle horn. Then Big George rode slowly out onto the ice, the reluctant yearling, as it followed, bracing back against the rope.

"Crowd 'em, kid, crowd 'em!" came the command from George, halted with his horse in mid-stream and the yearling still on the ice at the edge of the open water. A steer stepped gingerly after it. Another followed. George led the yearling forward. The two steers behind lifted their tails and their heads and plunged into the water. A dozen crowded behind them.

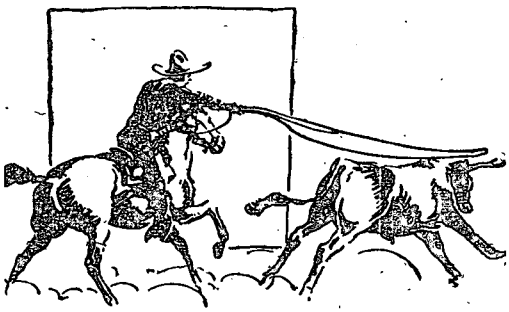
Wonder of wonders, the whole herd was on the move once more, splashing across the stream, scrambling and falling on the smooth ice at either bank. George had thrown the yearling and taken his rope from its horns before Val, behind the last steer, joined him.

"So that's why you wanted that yearling?" the kid observed, trying hard to keep a note of admiration out of his tone.

"They's tricks in all trades," drawled the foreman.

"How long would we have been there if you hadn't had the yearling to catch and lead those fool cattle?"

"Oh, I'd 'a' tied onto one o' them bigger steers but if you'll notice, my hoss ain't sharp-shod an' it would 'a' bothered him



consid'able to hold his feet while pullin' at a big critter."

The cattle, no longer frolicksome, were moving steadily forward in a bunched formation with Big George riding behind them.

"Travellin' pretty," he commented. Here's the stage road runnin' from Pivot to West Point, and darned if there ain't the stage. Old Larkins looks a heap like Santa Claus. He 'pears to be waitin' for us, kid."

Val said nothing. The stage road? He'd crossed that yesterday. The steers must be travelling in the right direction, even if it seemed all wrong to him. Big George was greeting the stage-driver, and Val reined up beside him. The cattle drifted on.

"Thunk it might be you a-comin'," said Larkins, "an' I waited for yuh." He produced a flat bottle from under the seat.

"Uh-unh, put it away," said Big George. "Way I'm feelin' right now, a shot o' that truck'd touch me off and I'd be cravin' more so doggoned bad I'd be a-headin' for town. Larkins, yuh knowed I was in recent, an' yuh 'orter know better'n to shove a bottle under my nose so sudden afterwards. What'd yuh have to tell me?"

Larkins said, "Howdy" to Val, offered a drink, which was declined, and then answered Big George.

"Why, I thunk I'd give yuh some kinda upsettin' dope I got there in town, which yuh probably don't know. Yuh're agoin' tuh get your walkin' papers, old hoss. Uh-huh, Old R. G.'s son done landed in Pivot an' seen you on that hell-roarin' spree, an' as I get it, he's out to the home ranch now, awaitin' for to fire yuh, quick as yuh gets thar this evenin'."

"Gwan, I ain't done nothin' tuh be fired for. Old R. G.'s kid, yuh say? Gosh A'mighty, the old boy hisself would 'a' helped us celebrate. I know him good an' he knows punchers. What kinda o' jasper was this kid? Plum' wuthless, I betcha, like so many rich fellers' boys."

"I didn't see him," returned Larkins. An' don't know nothin' 'bout him, but he's come to kinda take things over gradual, and it's straight goods I'm handlin' yuh, George, 'bout what's in the wind for you. Better have a big snifter now an' let these cussed steers go tuh hell, an' come on tuh town. I would, was it me. I'd beat the damned 'portant kid to it by quittin' fust. Crackies, man, they's a stem-windin' old blizzard goin' to hit in jus' 'bout one hour. See, the clouds is gettin' blacker already. That fine frost is fallin' all the time, an' it's too doggoned still for any good."

"I know that, too," growled Big George, "an' yuh'd better be driftin', Larkins, afore

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that blizzard wraps itself 'round yuh. Nope, don't want your bottle. Whether I's goin' to get fired or not, I gotta get these cattle over the trail. That is, me and my side kick, who ain't wuth a Continental damn, but probably R. G.'s kid'll make him boss, eh? Probably from what yuh tell me, the kid likes noble young men what ain't got no bad habits."

Young Edmond's face was on fire, and to hide his confusion he spurred after the steers, where Big George presently joined him.

"Willie, 'id yuh see anything of R. G.'s sucklin'?" the foreman asked gruffly.

"No," faltered Val briefly.

"I'll bet he's a 'portant, swell-headed cheese," vouchsafed George. "Jus' same, it sure gets my goat to think a puppy like that's goin' to hand me my walkin' papers. Gratitude for yuh, ain't it, when yuh's punched for an outfit ten straight years?"

"I agree with him, though, absolutely," said Val. "No man that drinks and carouses——"

V

BUT Big George had loped ahead. At another creek they once again battled with the steers; George once again led forward the yearling, and the crossing was negotiated. Then the cattle drifted along a fence, following a long ridge, and a short man, wearing chaps and a long overcoat, rode through a gate in this fence. His eyes were sharp and his face fox-nosed.

"'Lo, Smithers," said George with undisguised hostility. "Must be business that brings you out a day like this?"

"'Tis." Smithers sat sideways in his saddle, and Val reined in because Big George had done so. "Mincin' words none," Smithers continued, looking through Val curiously and then ignoring him as completely as though he did not exist, "George, I got a proposition tuh put up to yuh. Maybeso yuh've heard as a new boss has hit the V7. If yuh ain't, I'm tellin' yuh I've seed him, an' he's a smart-Aleck coyote what's out for your scalp. Uh-huh."

"This is twice them remarks has percolated to my ears. I'm beginnin' to think it's damn' funny," muttered George. "Knowin' you, Smithers, and how yuh loves the V7—like I love a lobo—I 'spect your proposition's somethin' tuh hand 'em a dirty package?"

Smithers removed a mitten and, reaching into his overcoat pocket, brought out a sheaf of yellow bills. Thumbing through them to show their large denominations, he spoke.

"I had wind as yuh was movin' the V7's show steers, George. It'd be considerable to my advantage if them steers wasn't in no shape to compete at the Live Stock Show in Denver, come January. Yeh, I got some like 'em; and was these V7's not to be thar, I'd walk off with the prizes an' the top prices. Hell of a storm's comin' on, George. S'pose you take this five hundred dollars an' let them cattle drift whereever they damn' pleases?

"This babe here"—Smithers jerked his head to indicate Val—"can do as he pleases. He can't do a cussed thing with the cattle if he's alone, and I don't give two whoops what he reports to Kent Rivers or the new boss. Damage'll be done tuh the steers, and that's what counts."

Val bit his lips to keep hot words back. His face was suffused with hot blood. Big George was gazing with a peculiar intensity at Smithers, who flushed as he resumed.

"Yuh're agoin' to get turned out jus' like a dog, George. Here in the middle of winter with nothin' for yuh to do, no money and no home. That's the gratitude this low-down V7 feels toward yuh after yuh givin' your best years and your heart's blood to 'em. With this cash yuh could go some place an' have a hell of a good time all winter long with never a care, 'stead of ridin' the grub line or moochin' at bars—though either o' them occupations beats freezin' yourself tuh death and workin' like a slave for a danged outfit what don't 'preciate nothin' and ain't

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got no gratitude. Jus' think o' the dirty deal they're goin' to hand yuh, George! And what I's askin' is such a triflin' thing for so much money—jus' to ride off an' leave these steers.

He unmittened his other hand and produced a quart bottle. "Take a snort of this, George; it'll——" He broke off, for out of the north came a roar of wind; and a white wall, from sky to earth, advanced before it at racing speed. The steers had sensed the menace before the men; had turned south, were travelling rapidly.

"Finished, Smithers?" came Big George's voice, as ominous as the approaching storm itself.

"I—uh——" began the fellow as Big George's horse shot forward and its rider's arm encircled Smithers' middle. His horse jumped from under him, but Big George held his squirming victim with his left arm, while the smack! smack! smack! of open-handed blows rang loud.

"I been honin' to slap your mug for a long, long time," rumbled Big George, hurling Smithers to the ground.

"Get 'round them cattle, kid!" he yelled at Val. "And stick to 'em as close as a cocklebur. If yuh let ten feet get atween them and you, you'll lose 'em and I'll be huntin' yuh. Damn such a worthless helper and damn Smithers! Did he think any cow-hand what is a cow-hand'd desert his cattle, any time, even if he knowed he was goin' to get kilt when he landed 'em?"

Val heard no more, for he was racing after the steers. He rode ahead of them just as the storm struck—a maze of wind-driven snow which sucked the breath from his nostrils and into which he could not see for ten feet. Gritting his teeth, he lashed at the heads of the leading steers; but they gave him scant heed, drifting right on before the white whirlwind. He cried out at the helpless impotency of his efforts. Even his horse refused to obey the reins, turning tail to the roaring wind as had the cattle.

A horseman appeared beside him. A voice boomed, "Hodoo, dogies! Hikie!" Big George was there ahead of the drifting herd, cursing, cajoling the cattle, lashing their faces with his rope, which snapped and popped and smote like a living thing. Val saw him—large, viking-like on his big horse, face bare to the storm—forcing his horse into the teeth of it, bending the half-blinded cattle, whooping them to an about face, sending them, by sheer force of rope and arm and voice, into the face of the terrific storm.

"Get that bronc' squared 'round, fella!" George boomed. "Rip him wide open! Give him hell! He'll face it! Help a little, damn yuh!"

By what Val considered a superhuman effort, he did face his mount into the storm. He swore at the silly cattle, and the wind whipped the words from his lips, saying "Wzzzz!"

No thanks to Val if the steers turned and moved forward into the blinding-white, wind-driven sheets of snow, and he knew it. Minutes later George was beside him once more.

"Stick tuh the tail end of 'em, feller. I'll whoop a little bunch ahead. The rest'll foller. Reach 'round and clear your bronc's eyes every little while. If yuh feel yourself gettin' numb, walk and pound yourself; but, by thunder, don't yuh let these critters stop or turn back!"

"Better wait," shrilled Val, "or find shelter! We can't——"

"Can't huh? We *gotta!* Fella, if yuh go back on me, I'll cut your throat. Had to catch that stink lizard Smithers' hoss, put him on it an' head him for his house. Orter 'a' let him get snowed under an' freeze."

George's words died away in the distance. Val was alone behind the steers, heading straight into the most terrific storm he had ever beheld.

"I'll not go back on you!" he cried aloud, and thought, "Great Scott! Whether I like him or not, Big George is sure a man—a man big enough to refuse a five-hundred-dollar bribe and then put the cur that offered it on the right trail to safety."

Thereafter for seemingly uncounted hours, Val moved in a chaotic world, without sense of direction, distance or objective. A world of howling wind and flying snow, populated only by grotesque, snow-plastered, moving bodies that bent into the gale ahead and went endlessly on and on. Once he was aware that his horse was

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practically sliding down a steep hill, and then there were willows to right and left, low-bending and snow-shrouded.

The moving cattle knocked the snow from the willows they touched, and his horse, wiser than he in this crisis, leaped around a bunch of the steers that would have left the main bunch and sent them back into line. They plunged across another stream. How Big George had forced the leaders to take it, Val did not know. In fact, he knew very little of what was going on. It might as well have been midnight for all he could see. The cattle moved and he followed, and after an interminable time Big George once more loomed up beside him.

"Stickin' with 'em, I see. B'gosh, yuh're doin' good, fella. Cold?"

"No, a little numb maybe, and my hands and feet ache."

"Outa that saddle, an' hoof it an' flop your arms. I might also state, if it's worthy of mention, as your nose is froze."

"What?" Val dismounted and found he could hardly stand, for his feet felt exactly as if they were asleep. "How far is it, George? How the dickens do you find the way?"

"Six miles yet. Oh, I know a few landmarks, storm or shine. Besides, this storm come from the north. That's our general direction. 'Id yuh think o' that? Hobble! Doggone yuh, hobble, Willie!"

"How in the world did you make the cattle take that last stream?"

"Them leaders is snowed plum' blind. I rammed three head of 'em right out into mid-stream afore they knowed what was up. Keep hoofin' it, kid, till yuh gets plum' warm."

Big George was gone again. It seemed to Val years later, when he had walked and ridden by turns and had gone through bars in two fences which in his tenderfoot inexperience he did not close, that the wind suddenly abated, although he could hear it whistling near and the snow came down with unabated fury. He could not understand why the storm's buffeting had ceased until he discovered that the steers were passing along a trail lined on either side by great willows.

VI

A SNOW-COVERED rider, not Big George, came around the drag-end of the moving steers and reined alongside the tenderfoot cowboy.

"Beautiful day, Val; how're you standing it?" Kent Rivers' voice.

"Jingo, I'm glad to see you!" cried Val, pawing snow out of his eyes. "I thought we never would get here. I'd given up all hope."

"Storm's lifting," chuckled Kent. "Generally does quiet down just at twilight. We'll be into the feed lot in a little bit now. Well, keep bringing up the rear. I'll get up alongside. Thought you might have a little trouble getting through these willows." He moved forward.

"Is this the only place he thought we might have trouble?" thought Val. "Great Caesar! I got to admit to myself that I'd have been stumped at the first creek, and as for taking a cattle herd to its destination in this awful storm! How'd he do it?"

He snapped to attention. Cattle in the willows were moving to join the herd, and some of the herd were attempting to break away into the willows. Somehow Val stopped both movements, for his horse managed the business practically unguided.

"I said anybody could drive cattle," muttered Val, "and blamed if this cow-pony don't know ten times more about it than I do."

The snow suddenly ceased falling, the wind hushed and the murky white world became very still as the last of the steers filed through a gate into a strongly fenced feed lot where snow-covered hay scattered on the ground showed green as the animals kicked it up and immediately fell to devouring it.

Big George swung down and closed the gate. "All there," he told Kent. "Never lost a one. My greenhorn helper what I ain't thankin' yuh none for sendin' done noble.

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Kinda figger he's got the right stuff in him, Kent."

"He ought to have," said Kent Rivers drily and grinned at Val. "Yeh, George, he sure ought to have."

"Get off, kid, an' rub your nose with a snowball," advised Big George. "Hol' on," as Val dismounted, "I'll do it for yuh. Yuh wouldn't press down near hard enough. Now, my old beak's sure tough. Never did get it friz; though if yuh'll notice them little blackish holes in my cheeks, they come from facin' a storm what was a storm." George applied a wadded handful of snow to Val's white nose with unmerciful force.

"B' gravy, Kent," he chuckled, "tears is runnin' outa the greenie's eyes, but he's never squawked once. He put up a scrap like a bantam rooster back in Pivot some few nights since; an', Rivers, we never did get him tuh take on a cargo o' red liquor. Don't believe yuh done so rotten as you usually does when yuh ties onto a green jay-bird."

Kent made no reply and the three rode to the stable. There something struck Big George.

"Kent, got a hoss I can borrow to get to town?" he asked. "This is a company hoss I'm forkin' an' he's tired, too. Yuh see, I heard from two different fellers, as we come along the trail, how this was to be my last day's work for the old V7. Uh-huh, Kent, they told me Old R. G.'s boy was here awaitin' for to fire me. Is he up to the house?"

"Go and see," said Kent Rivers, plainly embarrassed and at a loss.

George walked towards the main house, and Kent turned to Val. "You boys saw the stage-driver and Smithers, then?"

"Yes." Val stared at the man, puzzled. Then something of understanding came to him, and he burst out, "Say, was that part of your scheme—the scheme you wouldn't tell me—to test Big George and—and—me?"

Kent nodded. "I saw Larkins myself and asked him to tell Big George what he probably did, and I sent a neutral boy to Smithers' ranch to tell him our show steers were being moved today and that Big George was to be fired. Knowing how Smithers hates us and that he'd give his eye-teeth to beat us at the Stock Show, I figured he'd see a good chance to do us some dirt. What did he do, Val?"

"Plenty," replied Old R. G.'s son, "but I can tell you about it later."

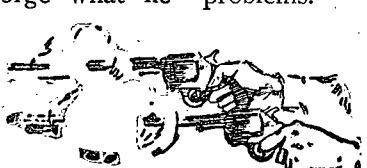
"Plenty, eh? But I notice our range foreman brought the steers through. The storm was providential for the benefit of my scheme. You've still got the check, I suppose?" Kent Rivers gazed quizzically at the kid.

"Oh, but didn't he bring the steers through!" exclaimed Val. "And, Rivers, how I wish you could have seen him slap Smithers. The check? Yes, oh, yes; I've still got it." He reached into an inside pocket and drew forth a slip of blue paper, gazed at it curiously for a moment, a strange little wry smile on his lips, then tore it to fragments. Watching these fall, he cryptically said, "So much, also, for my preconceived notions."

Kent reached for the young fellow's hand and was squeezing it hard in the fast-gathering darkness when Big George's voice boomed. "Hey, Kent, they ain't nobody here, 'cept the cook and she don't know nothin' 'bout Old R. G.'s kid."

"What'll we tell him?" asked Val in a frightened tone. "He's so darned white and such a square shooter himself that he's liable to blow up if he thinks any kind of a trick's been played on him."

"Leave it to me," returned Kent, chuckling joyfully. "I think you'll have to admit I'm a pretty good little fixer of touchy problems."



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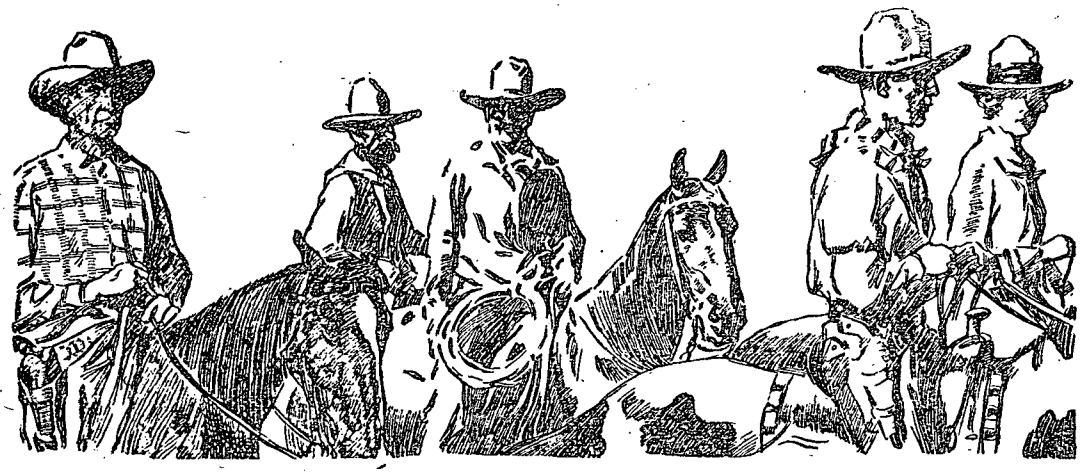

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

HAZING THE HERD

WHEN Stephen Payne starts his tenderfoot in "Boss of the V7" to hazin' cattle across streams, he lets him in on one of the toughest jobs a waddie has to buck. An old-time Texan, Douglas Branch, gives some idea of the little things that might start a bunch of cattle millin' and fightin', no matter how hard the point-riders fought back, in his book about cowboys and their jobs.

"Crossing a herd over a flooded stream, muddy and running with a swift current, was a situation escaped only by the trail-drivers of the late summer. The lead-cattle instinctively feared such water, and the point-riders had hard work in urging them on. Sometimes these riders would force their own horses out into the stream to convince the cattle that there was no danger. Once the cattle were out to their swimming depth, they usually went on to the opposite bank with the rest of the herd following. But if a piece of drift-wood struck a steer, or if the leaders became alarmed at the swiftness of the current, the cattle might 'mill' in a panic-stricken circle, becoming a confused, struggling mass as other cattle followed. Then came crucial labors for the trail-men; the cattle on the bank had to be checked, and a point-rider had to force his mount into the midst of the frightened mass, break the mill, and force some of the cattle to lead off in swimming for the shore.

"The classic item in the story of stream-crossing is the story for June 2, 1866, in the journal of George Duffield: 'Worked all day in the River trying to make the Beeves swim and did not get one over. Had to go back to Prairie Sick and discouraged. Have *not* got the *Blues* but am in *Hell of a fix.*'"

WHEN LEADVILLE WAS WILDEST—

YOU can't get around it—the hombre who's riding the range is the one who can spot the tenderfoot, every time. Here's a man who knows the cow country because he lived there—and that's why he knows SHORT STORIES Western yarns are the real thing. His colorful letter takes this issue's $25 prize—we've sent the check off in the morning's mail, Mr. Jenison!

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES for the past six years; in fact, have never missed an issue since the second April issue of 1921, when for lack of a public library I sought reading matter at a book stand, and thus became introduced to SHORT STORIES. In the years since, I have found it publishes the very best, cleanest, true-to-life stories of any magazine on the market, and I've tried them all.

I was born and raised in Colorado, and spent my boyhood days in the cow country of our western slope. So I feel that I know the West as it is today and during my time; and as it was through first-hand stories from my father, who was in Dodge City in '72, coming from there to Colorado in its boom days, and was in Leadville in '78, which the old-timers all admit was its wildest time. In fact, he was there the night that Frodsham, the famous confidence man, was hung.

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The stories of the West that you give us in SHORT STORIES I feel are "true to form" from comparing notes with old-timers, and from things I saw twenty-five years ago, as a boy, up in Routt County. They all ring true and recall many incidents here at home. Tuttle, Knibbs, and Raine are my favorites. I look forward to their stories more than I do the daily papers, and that's saying a lot for a printer.

Taking SHORT STORIES from another angle, that of the printer, I always enjoy looking it through for its typographical appearance, from its cover, with the big red sun and the fine press-work, to the ads and the Story Tellers' Circle, which I always read, and I can truthfully say I find fewer proof-reader's mistakes than in any magazine of the fiction class. It can't be beaten, or even equaled, anywhere on the market, so keep it as it is.

I just thought I'd drop a line of appreciation, after reading P. M. Dreibellis' letter in the Story Tellers' Circle. Yours for the same old first class SHORT STORIES.

DON P. JENISON,
Hotchkiss, Colo.

There's another $25 prize all set and waitin' for the reader who sends in the most interesting letter before the next issue goes to press. More prizes after that, too. The competition's gettin' stiffer than the finals of the broncho bustin' at a Pendleton rodeo, too—and that's some stiff! Fine letters you're sendin' in, folks—let's have some more of 'em. There's the same chance for everybody.

A WRITER WHO RIDES THE RANGE

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON went West when he was too small to see over the back of a burro, and he's lived in the cow country most of the time since then. He's another of SHORT STORIES' writers who knows the range from A to Z, as his fast-moving "Spoilers of the Range" in this issue shows. Here is his autobiography, written specially for SHORT STORIES' readers:

WHEN I was nine years old my father traded some Eastern realty for a Western cattle ranch. In those days, the late nineties, ranches were actually the layouts of present day fiction. Your neighbor was always Uncle Sam. The map of your deeded land looked like the moon and stars—your home sections and your far-flung quarter section water holes. The only land you fenced was your hay land. And if perchance you did fence your entire home place it was to keep your cattle *out*, not *in*. If your cows came home, you drove them as far away as you could.

"Even in the late nineties our ranch was thirty years old. You thought, when approaching it across the range, that it was a town. It had been built in the sixties by a Mexican of hidalgan blood and those old fellows were quite generous with their adobe bricks. There were twenty houses, many of them two-storied, forming a quadrangle centered by a well. There was a cupolaed school and a cupolaed church (I never saw an old Spanish ranch layout that didn't include these) and there was a store. There had to be a store because groceries—and by groceries I mean frijoli beans—were the principal tender of payroll under the labor scheme by which that ranch had been run prior to our acquisition. This scheme was simple, and required no cash capital. A peon or vaquero would drift in; the hidalgo would give him some adobe bricks and abundant credit at the store. The peon built a house and loafed in it. When haytime or roundup came along, the hidalgo would order him to work. If he refused, as was often the case, the owner would simply oust him from his house and stop his credit for frijoli beans. The peon would drift to another ranch, or plaza, leaving the layout behind him larger by one twelve foot cube of mud.

"Thus the twenty houses which my father found on this ranch when he acquired it in '96. In its second thirty years, latterly under my own management, it has dwindled—its range because of the homesteads among its aforesaid far-flung water holes, and its mud walls because of the ravages of time. Yet enough of those old walls still stand to preserve the quadrangle. The water still flows in the ditch builded in '66 by that old Spaniard—Jesus Barela was his name—and the alfalfa he planted, never since reseeded, still blooms thrice a year. The niños of his peonage still sleep in the bunkhouse, and under the rotted floor of his church still rest the bones of his priests. His ghost still walks. For we gringos never did get anything but a bill of sale to the Southwest. Spain branded it, and neither you nor I will ever vent that brand.

"I was errant from this ranch long

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enough to attend college, to become a surveyor, and to wander about the world a bit looking for lines to survey. Here and there I found them; some were rail lines, some were pipe lines, some were section lines, some were highways, some were subdivisions in Florida and some were trenches in France. On some I was flunky, on some I was boss. Sometimes I achieved praise and once or twice I was fired.

"But finally these excursions were done and I returned to the Western ranch. Here I have been turning my hand to cows, cow feed, cow stories and sometimes—yes, indeed, that ghost still walks—and sometimes frijoli beans.

"ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON."

"RIGHT IN THE CORRAL AN' READY TO BE RODE"

TAKE a slant at what we've drove in from the range for next issue—an' then let us know if you don't call it one of the rippin'est, rarin'est bunch o' critters you ever saw gathered in one corral.

Leadin' the herd is a high-power yarn by W. C. Tuttle—a smashin' Sad Sontag novel called "Rustler's Trail." A dangerous trail she turns out to be, when Sad rides into the midst of some other fellers' quarrel an' sticks the nose o' his own gun in it. There's a mysterious killin' smack at the start, an' what with shootin's an' plumb rapid action a feller's pretty near bucked out o' the saddle before the thrillin' finish. We call this tale one o' Tuttle's best—so watch for it, folks.

Ridin' right along with it you'll get another crackin' good long Western tale, "The Ridin' Fool," by Charles Wesley Sanders. There's murder an' mystery in the story, an' some of the classiest bronco-bustin' you ever knew. It's a pitchin', rampagin' yarn, an' you won't want to miss it.

Ernest Haycox is the next favorite on the list. His yarn is called "The Desert Eye," and it's the story of readin' sign on a slick desert crook. Then there'll be "The Devil's Chimney," a Wolcott LeClear Beard tale of bandits an' bitter gun-fights in Arizona; "The Donkey Laugh" by Barry Scobee, a new Float the Dude Cowboy story that'll set your sides to shakin'; an' more Westerns as well.

Then we've slapped the S S brand on a fast-movin' Lemuel De Bra story of smugglin' on the Mexican border, an' other stories that are jammed with action an' surprises. An' you'll guess a long time before you guess what's goin' to happen to Tremaine in Part III of "Buying Trouble," the Jackson Gregory serial of pearls and peril in the South Seas.

Yes, sir—it's goin' to be some rodeo when these all come out of the chute in one bunch! Just read it an' see!

A NEW WRITER

FOLKS, shake hands in this issue with a new writer but an old campaigner—Staff Sergt. K. Carleton Unthank, Hq. 83d Division, Ft. Hayes. Sergt. Unthank has been a regular army stager most of the time since the *Maine* was sunk in '98. He ran away from his Virginia home to "join up," and he served in Cuba, the Philippines and most places in the United States. In 1917 he was made a captain, and was put to training rookies. He recently reënlisted "for the purpose of getting in thirty years of service."

But between enlistments Mr. Unthank was a ranch hand in Wyoming, and it was there he gathered some of the material for "Tom Fentress Smells Powder Again," his first yarn for SHORT STORIES readers. He writes us:

"In July, 1899, I worked on the grade for a time about twenty miles south of Alliance, Nebraska—I called the town Reliance in the tale—and witnessed a shooting fray in a saloon and gambling hall in that town. I also played a little poker and one of the men in the game was such a silent individual and so odd-looking that I never forgot him. He inspired the picture of Silent Jim."

THE MAIL BAG

SEEMS as though you can always count on a Westerner! Not long ago we printed a letter from Clem Yore saying that SHORT STORIES and its kind of reading stands ace-high way down in

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DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

Samoa, and that they're doin' their best to get a library started. He asked us to give 'em a send-off with some magazines an' books—which we did, pronto—an' put in a plea to readers of SHORT STORIES as well. Pretty near before there's time for the mail boats to go both ways comes this letter from the South Seas, tellin' how a California reader crashed through:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Very many thanks for your letter and for the SHORT STORIES magazines and the books you so kindly sent. It is very good of you to go to so much trouble for us and be sure your kindness is appreciated by many lonely people here who have not opportunities of obtaining the latest reading matter.

The books arrived safely and have been and are being read with interest, passing many a pleasant hour. Your SHORT STORIES are circulated here and are always welcome. I received a letter and books from one of your readers, Mr. George Wase, Alhambra, Calif., who is kindly helping us with our library.

Again, many thanks.

W. M. BELL, Resident Commissioner,
Fagamalo, Savaii, Western Samoa.

OLD-TIMER TIBBETTS

You might ask Old-timer if he remembers the winter in Wisconsin that it was necessary to build bonfires under the cows before they could be milked and the smoke from the chimneys froze into chunks, fell to the ground and had to be carted away on bobsleds.—A. W. C.

OLD-TIMER TIBBETTS chuckled when he read this.

"I've shorely heard tell o' that freezin' spell in Wisconsin," he said, "but I cain't lay no claim tuh bein' there. I was out in Arizony that winter, an' me an' my pack-mule Nance was havin' a right mean time of it. I was plumb out o' hardtack an' bacon, an' Nance hadn't had a good lick o' salt fer two months.

"That mule was real fond o' salt, yuh see, an' when she didn't git it 'bout every so often she took tuh actin' onnery. Wal, she was buckin' like one o' these here two-lung gas-buggies, not ainxin' tuh work without she got her salt. Course, I didn't have any with me.

"An' then, prospectin' around, I comes onto what looks like a reg'lar bonanza, an' it suits Nance right down tuh the ground. The reason bein, yuh see, that it turns out tuh be a salted mine."

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